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Little White Lies

Truth & Movies









WHAT
IS THE
OPPOSITE
OF

**“THE
WORLD
IS YOUR
OYSTER”?**



While We're Young

Directed by **NOAH BAUMBACH**
Starring **BEN STILLER, NAOMI WATTS, ADAM DRIVER**
Released **3 APRIL**

GENERATIONAL DRIFT AND THE SCOURGE OF HIPSTERISM ARE EXAMINED WITH CATTY HUMOUR IN NOAH BAUMBACH'S BITTERSWEET COMEDY OF MANNERS.

REVIEW

You know how it goes. One minute you've got the world at your feet, the next you're knee-deep in mortgage bills and soiled nappies. The truism that life passes us by all too quickly has been articulated by countless filmmakers over the years, with comedy cinema in particular serving to reinforce commonly-held perceptions relating to the behaviour of men and women over 40. Yet of all the recent films that ruminate on the interminable crisis of middle-age — from Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* to Judd Apatow's *This Is 40* — few have managed to feel as relevant as Noah Baumbach's disarmingly profound seventh feature, *While We're Young*.

True to form, Baumbach's film calls upon the negative discourse of middle-agedness for comedic effect. (After all, where would the humour lie in depicting an uneventful middle-age?) Josh (Ben Stiller) and Cornelia (Naomi Watts) are a fortysomething Manhattan couple for whom preserving a sense of freedom is apparently more important than starting a family. Not even their closest friends' leap into parenthood is enough to force Josh and Cornelia to reassess their priorities. Still, both are fully conscious of the fact that the life they've made together isn't what they'd once imagined it would be. As Josh remarks glibly of their present situation, "life is what happens when you make other plans."

Another negative stereotype superficially endorsed by the film is the

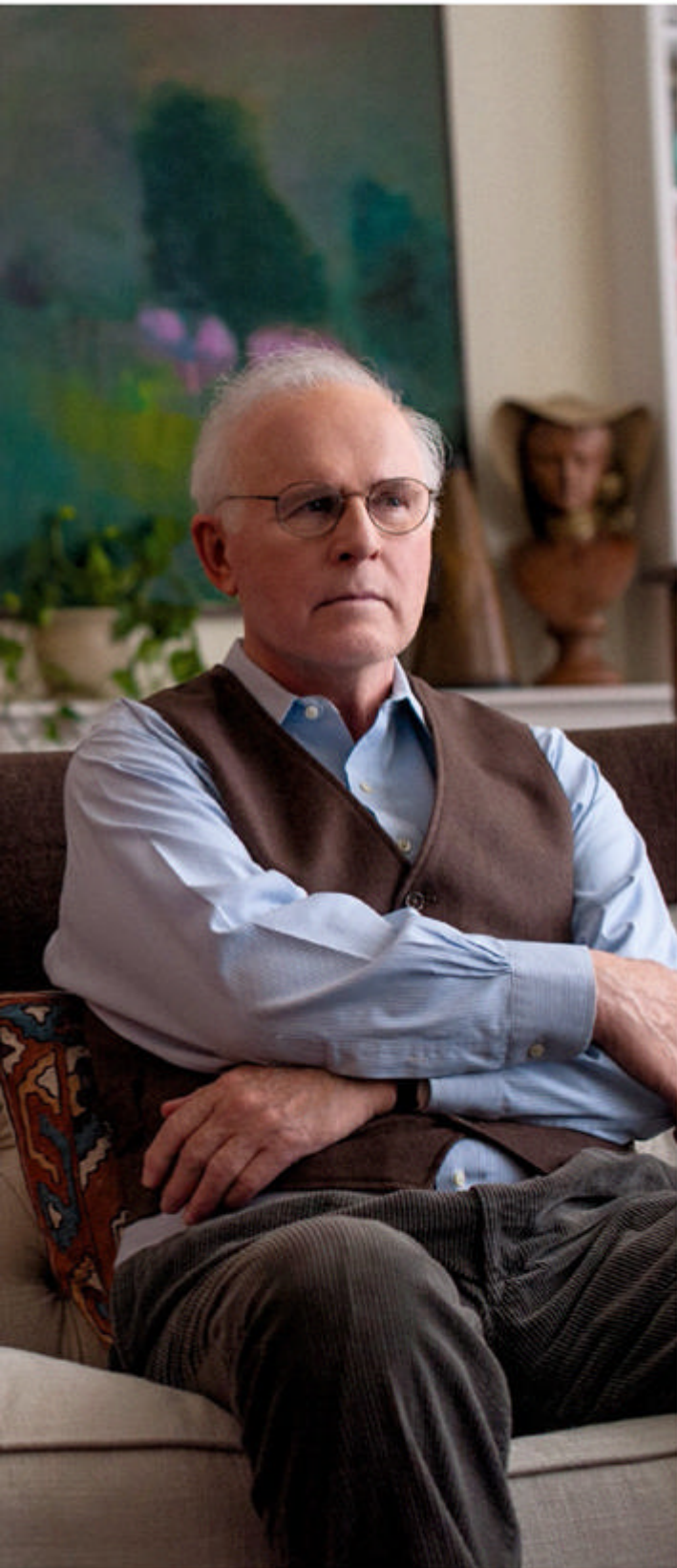
twentysomething hipster — that most vague and lazily ascribed of labels, which Baumbach does well to avoid — as personified by Adam Driver and Amanda Seyfried's chicken-keeping, artisanal ice cream-making, vinyl-collecting, Williamsburg loft-dwelling romantics, Jamie and Darby. The occasion of these two married couples forming an unlikely bond provides plenty of sharp observational humour, with Baumbach stressing the dissimilarities between them almost to the point of parody. Predictably, it's not long before Jamie and Darby's youthful exuberance catalyses Josh and Cornelia's inertia. To be fair, Baumbach makes it impossible not to be both fond and envious of them. Jamie and Darby's perpetual adolescence is both energising and intimidating.



They do what they like, when the like. They stay up late and attend psychedelic therapy sessions. They frequent trendy bars and throw block party barbecues. They *make* things. And yet, just as predictably, Josh and Cornelia are no more content living vicariously through their newfound bohemian besties than they were before. Initially they wanted to be more like them; pretty soon they won't be able stand being around them.







●

“Baumbach is no misanthrope. He’s simply unafraid to show humanity in all its flawed glory.”

●

Despite all this, you won’t find the slightest trace of wistfulness here. This is not a wallowing requiem for all those complacent souls who suddenly find themselves succumbing to the effects of gravity. Nor is it a lament for squandered youth. Likewise, at no point does it feel like Baumbach’s ire is being directed squarely at contemporary youth culture. That’s not to say he’s made an impassioned defence of Millennials, but his film is not dismissive of them either. In fact, *While We’re Young* doesn’t pass judgement on any of its characters or the contrasting demographics they represent — although there’s a tangible sense of disdain towards what Josh describes as “soundbite culture”, not to mention the fact that portable consumer technology has permeated every aspect of modern living. If anything, the only thing Baumbach displays nostalgia towards is, well, things. Specifically, the kind of outmoded, hand-crafted paraphernalia and pop culture relics from the writer/director’s formative years that have been reclaimed by today’s youth to feed their own much maligned retromania.

Baumbach is no misanthrope, he’s simply not afraid to show humanity in all its flawed glory. He’s the type of filmmaker who’s at his best when occupying the headspaces of self-destructive yet sympathetic characters, from Ben Stiller’s failed musician in 2010’s *Greenberg*, to Greta Gerwig’s fleet-footed goof in the director’s previous (and best) film, 2012’s *Frances Ha*. The difference with *While We’re Young* is that, while we can certainly relate to each protagonist, we’re never encouraged to invest in their domestic lives on a more meaningful level. This is in essence not a character study, then, but rather a study of the way we are, a sort of connect-the-dots exercise devised to reveal some basic truths relating to the human condition.

Baumbach doesn’t deal in broad brushstrokes. He knows that not all twentysomethings are entitled freeloaders, just as not all fortysomethings are baby-crazy sad sacks. So what’s he trying to say by depicting them as such? Perhaps it’s his way of subverting two of the more ubiquitous stereotypes perpetuated by mainstream studio comedies. Because if there’s one overarching tenet to be derived from *While We’re Young*, it’s that people should be defined by their actions, not their age or social status. After all, doesn’t everyone feel the weight of social expectation to some extent? Aren’t we all seeking self-fulfilment, regardless of when, why or how often our perspective flips? We are all driven by fear. Fear of failure. Fear of not fitting in. The only way we can ever hope to overcome this is by attempting to figure out what it is that makes us happy.



Ever since his 1995 debut, *Kicking and Screaming*, Baumbach has consistently subscribed to the viewpoint that there are no assurances in life, no single mantra to guarantee wellbeing. The upshot of this is that you have to learn to be tolerant of other people's attitudes and opinions, even if they happen to clash with your own. Take Jamie, for instance. Sure he's insincere, narcissistic and selfish, but does that make him a bad guy? Not as far as Baumbach is concerned. (If early rumours prove accurate, audiences will have to wait until later this year to see Driver play a proper villain.) He and Josh are alike in so many ways — both are culturally engaged documentarians aspiring to greatness, both are single-minded (often to a fault) in their approach to getting ahead in life. In other ways, they're complete opposites, especially when it comes to putting their respective principles into practice. This equates to a clash of personalities that nimbly treads the line between comedy and tragedy. It's first-hand experience versus cultural appropriation, individualism versus ethical integrity, analogue versus digital. At one point, Josh refers to Jamie as "pathologically happy." It's not an accurate description, of course; he's no more immune to the insecurities of adulthood than Josh. He just hides it better.

If there's a semi-autobiographical lilt to *While We're Young*, it's most evident in the dysfunctional relationship between Josh and his father-in-law and mentor, Leslie, played by the great Charles Grodin. Baumbach

is the son of the scholar, novelist and critic Jonathan Baumbach and the *Village Voice* critic Georgia Brown. If there is anything to be discerned from Josh's (and Jamie's) constant approval seeking, which builds gradually before crescendoing somewhat abruptly in a melodramatic confrontation at a black-tie tribute, it's that no matter how old we get, we never stop wanting to make our parents proud. This is Baumbach's wisest and most universal film, gently shaken by an existential anxiety that underpins it as a piece of deeply personal filmmaking. **ADAM WOODWARD**

ANTICIPATION. *Frances Ha was a delight. Is Noah Baumbach finally on a roll?*

4

ENJOYMENT. *A lot to digest in a single viewing, but feels unmistakably like another vital work from an ever-maturing filmmaker.*

4

IN RETROSPECT. *With the director's next collaboration with Greta Gerwig, *Mistress America*, already completed, this is surely a time for Baumbach fans to rejoice.*

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VARIETY

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THE LIMITS OF CONTROL

Adam Driver is bringing countercultural credence to the mainstream, but on his own terms. *LWLies* talks to him.

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PYJAMA PARTY: AN ORAL HISTORY OF KICKING AND SCREAMING

On the occasion of its 20th birthday, *LWLies* canvases opinion from the cast and crew of Noah Baumbach's seminal indie debut.

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MAN ABOUT TOWN

LWLies talks to Noah Baumbach about the New York Subway system and his treatise on modern hipsterism and creativity, *While We're Young*.

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THRIFT SHOP AND CURIOUS BAUMBACHIANA

We explore each of Noah Baumbach's directorial projects to date with an essay which focuses on a single object or element.



THE LIMITS

INTERVIEW BY SOPHIE MONKS KAUFMAN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY OLIVER STAFFORD

ADAM DRIVER'S ULTRA-LOUCHE ON-SCREEN PERSONA CLOAKS PROFESSIONAL ANXIETIES AND EXISTENTIAL DREAD. *LWLIES* TALKS TO THE ACTOR WHOSE STAR IS CURRENTLY IN SWIFT AND UNSTOPPABLE ASCENT.

“I’m gonna send you home to your parents covered in cum,” says Adam Driver to Lena Dunham with endearing intensity in the first season of *Girls*, like he absolutely needs to get those exact words off his chest. Driver’s characters are not glib or sarcastic. Comedy comes at their expense not with their complicity. Remember how he startled Oscar Isaac with the vocal range channelled over the words ‘outer’ and ‘space’ in the Coen brothers’ *Inside Llewyn Davis*. In Noah Baumbach’s *While We’re Young*, Driver’s serious edge gives grounding to Jamie, a “hipster” filmmaker who might otherwise seem flyaway and amoral. It beggars belief that this idiosyncratic, charming, indie performer will feature in *Star Wars VII - The Force Awakens* but this is what 2015 has in store, as well as – less surprisingly – a role in Jeff Nichols’ *Midnight Special*. *LWLies* spoke to the exceptionally polite Driver while he was in Taiwan about to start production on another massively significant collaboration, working with Martin Scorsese on *Silence*.

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LWLies: Your character, Jamie, has quite a manipulative approach to creativity. How much honesty do you think is necessary when it comes to filmmaking?

Driver: One hundred per cent. When I first read the script the character that I identified the most with was Ben Stiller's character, Josh. I see the benefit of discipline and in living with something for a long time even though the process is annoying, so it was tough for me to find a way in. I judge my own generation for appropriating items they have not lived with. There's a benefit in boredom and not being so interconnected and being alone with your thoughts and all those things. But Jamie, in the story, does create something from nothing and works fast. Josh has been labouring over the same thing for years and has, at a certain point, made what he's working on way too precious and self-important and that's also limiting whereas Jamie in a matter of days has created something. It's up to everyone else to judge what that is but that ambition is an attractive quality in a person and getting off on the interconnectedness of everything is not my first impulse – but I see how that's charming.

What is the trick to sitting with ideas for long enough that they mature but not so long that they fester?

That's a tricky thing about acting that I don't think I'll ever figure out. There's a danger in both. If there's anything I rediscover any time I get to work on something, it's not knowing an answer to anything. I try to practice that also in life as much as possible. Not knowing always leads to something more gratifying than feeling that you have the right answer. Obviously, you can't skip steps and you should do the work. I don't really have a set process or a certain way I have to do things. I also think it's a mistake for me to have a way of working that I want to impose on everyone else, that I want them to adapt to. I always think that there's so much information in not knowing a right answer.

Do you have any advice on developing self-discipline?

I don't, no, not really. I was very fortunate in that I just was put in situations where I felt the benefit, whether it be running or anything, really. I actually hate having to go through the process. I want to jump to the answer right away and it seems like everything in life tells you that you have to slow down but I have no advice because I feel like it's something that I will practice and rehearse until I die.

Is acting a job-for-life then?

I hope I get to do it for life. There's nothing else that I would rather do.

Do you think that it helps to ground you that you lived a different life before acting and celebrity?

I've just had different experiences, which have definitely helped shape who I get to be as an actor. What better acting training than being stuck in the military with a bunch of 18 or 19-year-olds who are just being crazy because they're away from home and missing family or handling machine guns. We didn't have any money, really, growing up and that's a really great experience to have. It shapes you and you get to live life and have mistakes. Being raised in a small town in Indiana, I'm so grateful for that experience even though at the time I couldn't wait to get out.

Do you ever imagine what your younger self would have made of what you're doing now?

I wouldn't have been able to believe it. I was just thinking about this recently, not about acting, but it's coming up on 10 years that I've lived in New York. When I first moved to NY I had two big sea bags and they were just filled with clothes. I was living in Hoboken, New Jersey, in my uncle's closet. He was living on the top floor of a house that didn't have a kitchen. I stayed in his closet because that was the

largest space on the ground to sleep. I stayed there for a couple of weeks until I found a room to rent from someone on Craigslist. I was walking to all the restaurants in that area, thinking, 'I'll just get a job and be a waiter and start school.' I now have a really great group of friends and I get to make a living doing what I love to do and I get to travel, which is like a huge thing. I can't imagine myself getting to go to Taiwan being from Mishawaka, Indiana.

What are the main differences between working on a small, indie film like *While We're Young* and working on a massive, massive, massive movie?

The amenities around you are a little better on a big budget movie than they are on a smaller movie but it doesn't really make a difference. It's not like suddenly the catering is better on *Star Wars* than on *While We're Young* and it's going to make you a better actor. I was lucky that it was JJ Abrams directing *Star Wars*. He is someone, like Noah, or like the Coen brothers or Scorsese, if it doesn't make sense to the story or the characters then everything else is secondary. In that sense they are all the same. Something like *Star Wars* is maybe a little bit different because so many people have a frame of reference for that but as far as big budget or small budget, you just have to make sense and be real and be truthful.

Do you think being a "hipster" is an actual thing or is it a nonsense construction?

It's probably a bit of both. There is kind of like a mindset of appropriating history but at the same time I don't think anyone can really judge anybody or, certainly, label them as something. I don't know what makes hipsters so I don't know, I couldn't tell you.

It seems like you're wary of pop cultural trends.

Whenever a large group of people suddenly feel like, 'We're all going to do this thing,' there's something in my DNA that never seems to want to go that route. It just seems to close you off to so many other possibilities. I'm not saying that as a prophet or someone who's good at practicing that. I'm more skeptical of things that are mass-produced.

Are you concerned about navigating Hollywood?

I'm still at the beginning... I don't know if it's even fair to say that I'm at the beginning because I could be at the end of a career. For me to say that I'll never do a certain thing because there's no value in it, it isn't really up to whatever the form is. There is some value in doing something that you maybe don't understand but you tried that experience and you know what you like and don't

like about it. I have opinions about all the Hollywood movies that I see that just suck. There are so many of them and, god, you can rail against them and they're not really about creating anything, they're about selling something and that's terrible. I feel no pressure to do any of that but that doesn't mean that there aren't smart directors that are still trying to find a smart way to work within a studio system. It doesn't really matter the size of the film or if it's a cartoon movie about foxes or whatever. If there's an interesting character and I feel like the people around it are really after something and I'm lucky enough to get the job then that's pretty great and the structure around it doesn't matter.



Are you good at reading from the outset whether the people and material involved chime with what you're after?

I feel like I just have an impulse about something, and I usually do no-brainers. If you get asked, 'Do you want to do a movie with the Coen brothers?' That's a no-brainer. 'Do you want to work with Martin Scorsese?' Sure! I've been fortunate to be put in a lot of situations where the people involved just seem to do the work for me. Or not the work for me, but it just made the choices obvious ones. I'm a bit thick, so if I feel myself being wishy-washy about something then it's hard to commit.

You're not thick. Why do you say that?

You can take things too seriously and suddenly you take yourself too seriously and it's good to be light even though the world is dark and we all die alone. It's a tricky thing to spend your life balancing.

Is your growing star profile playing havoc with this balancing act?

I try to stay detached from all that and try to not let anything get in the way of being a person. It's not really my job to make it about myself. There are other people involved. My wife keeps me very grounded. I'm also a straight, white male so I've had more opportunities than other people - completely unjustly - so you put it in perspective. I'm, like, surrounded by really inspiring people so I try to focus on that as much as possible. I say that, but that's a really hard thing to practice, especially when you lose your anonymity and suddenly you start thinking that you have something important to say or everything gets way too serious. It's not really about any of that. I don't know what it is about. I'm still trying to figure out what it is that I'm doing and what acting means. Who knows if it means anything at all?



It sounds like you're talking about the sweet spot at the core, which is your actual reason for doing things, which you're still trying to figure out.

Martin Scorsese has been doing it for so long but you still see that drive to figure it out, do it better, do things more economically, go a little deeper, take it less seriously or take it more seriously. A great thing about being an actor and why actors hopefully get to do what they do for a long time is that you never get to figure it out. There's a constant investigation that is both - when I see it in older actors - exciting and really terrifying because one, you never figure anything out and that's great and two, you never figure anything out and that's petrifying.

On the one hand you have eloquent theories of what it all means but on the other hand you're like 'maybe it means nothing'.

Like life.

Yeah!

It fuckin' sucks! I got to talk to a woman in the church in the Dominican sect of Catholicism in preparation for *Silence* and she was saying that it's all a big risk. She's devoted her life to something that could very much not be true. Maybe it's all about enjoying the experience which... I don't enjoy either. I feel like the best part of the job - and maybe you relate to this as a writer - is getting the job. Then it's all second-guessing yourself and doubt and the anguish of doing it.

It's also enjoyable when work is accepted by others. Is that the same for you?

It's better than people saying that they don't like it and they're not going to give you a job, but at the same time, not to sound completely joyless, sometimes people offer interpretations that are totally different to what you were working towards. It's good, but you always have to take it with a grain of salt. You didn't get there alone. Well, maybe you did, probably, more so than other people because you're a writer, but for me I'm supported by writing, directing, lighting, editing, you know - thank god! It's all so people can't see the mistakes and you can pass around the responsibility. But yeah, I'm sounding like a total fucking pessimist. When people respond to your work, who am I kidding, that feels really great and that's good and gratifying, but it's not really anything you can hang your hat on. You can't look for other people's praise to push you forward because that's also a trap.

[Laughs] Sorry for that really high-pitched laugh. It was because of the dramatic way you said "total fucking pessimist".

No, that's okay. I'm so in my head with what I'm saying I didn't even hear.

Great. I'll just release occasional laughs in the security that...

No. I'm lying, I did hear it and I'm judging you.

**"IT'S IMPORTANT TO
MAKE MISTAKES, TO
BE A FAILURE AND TO
LIVE RECKLESSLY."**

You say you're really pessimistic but that can't be the whole truth. When you're in a good relationship, surely that brings some lightness?

If you're lucky, because I feel like a lot of people don't have that in their life - even in that I've scored a jackpot, even with my friends who challenge me. A weird thing that I'm learning about acting is that the more you get to do, the more public you become. Anonymity and being a spy is what your job is, so suddenly to feel like you can't participate in things is tricky. It's important to make mistakes, to be a failure and to live recklessly. That's why it was kind of difficult at first to relate to Jamie. That mindset of interconnectedness, sharing everything and being so out there and open, for me - and I can only speak for myself because some people are better developed - it's not my impulse, because who gives a shit. And also, that's your stuff. Feeling the pressure to make things perfect or apologise or watch what you say or just how scary the internet is and how wildly inaccurate it almost all is, it can make you really want to not be a person. It's a tricky thing. In the past couple of years, and now, I'm still finding a way to navigate. I'm not on the internet really, like social media. The internet's a crazy place and just the way our culture is - phones and shit like that. It's a tricky thing to still be a person and do my job.

Are you more like Jamie than Josh in the sense that you try to make your life about physical things rather than digital ones?

Yeah, it's also because I just don't understand computers. My thumbs are really just too big. If I had skinnier thumbs I think I would be more technologically savvy. It just gets me really frustrated trying to type so many things. It takes me just double the time to do it. If I had skinnier fingers I would have a completely different philosophy so that's why I think I like tactile things.

How big exactly are your thumbs?

They're big. I wish I could show you.

Can you give us a household object of comparable size?

A basketball 🏀

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PYJAMA PARTY

AN ORAL HISTORY OF

KICKING AND SCREAMING

WORDS BY DAVID JENKINS & DAVID EHRLICH

PV

RANA JOY GLICKMAN — Line producer

OLIVIA D'ABO — Plays the role of Jane

JOSH HAMILTON — Plays the role of Grover

JOHN LEHR — Plays the role of Louis

CHRIS EIGEMAN — Plays the role of Max

CARA BUONO — Plays the role of Kate

MARY JANE FORT — Costume designer

J KATHLEEN GIBSON — Editor

In terms of relevant experience, Noah Baumbach's CV consisted of a blank piece of A4 prior to his attempts to make the movie that was originally titled *Fifth Year* in the early '90s. With money falling out on numerous occasions plus rewrites, extra characters and celebrity ballast required by funders during pre-production, the making of *Kicking and Screaming* actually comes across as something of a dream compared to the horror making-of narratives so prevalent during the period. Based on personal experiences and his time as a student at Vassar, Baumbach's film lives on as one of the most immaculate, melancholic and biting funny American debuts, though it is seldom given the credit it deserves, sadly falling between the stools of no-budget goofballing, *Clerks*, from 1994, and the acebic whimsy of 1997's *Rushmore*. *LWLies* hears the story behind how the film was made, what it means to its makers, and why we should collectively embrace it anew.

CARA BUONO “The typical route to becoming an actor back then was earning your spurs in theatre. You started off-Off-Broadway then somehow evolved on to features. People would max out their credit cards to make a film. I was involved in movies where it was a bunch of people hanging around with 16mm cameras. But it was an optimistic time where, if you made a movie, you really felt it might have a chance of breaking out.”

JOSH HAMILTON “Noah and I went to the same school in Brooklyn. He left it just as I started it, but it meant we had a lot of mutual friends. But we never actually met until he was casting what was then called *Fifth Year*. In terms of the parts I was getting, I was more satisfied with the stage than the film stuff. In plays I’d be cast as the romantic lead, but in films I’d be ‘Jerky Guy’ or ‘Annoying Guy.’”

RANA JOY GLICKMAN “I started out as an equestrian stunt woman and came up through the AD department.”

JOHN LEHR “I was living in Chicago and was involved in an improv theatre troupe called Ed with Carlos Jacott and Chris Reid, who are also in the film. It was the early '90s, all these Vassar guys were around. We were doing a lot of drugs and drinking back then, so it's all very vague. We had this horrible apartment on the north side of Chicago, and I first met him at a party. He was a nice guy. Very low key. Funny. He always carried a little notebook with him. Classic writer guy.”

RANA JOY GLICKMAN “*Kicking and Screaming* took many years to get off the ground. The actual production of the film was by far one of the most fun I’ve ever been involved with. The finance and pre-production was probably the toughest. We were fully-crewed and funded three times and lost our funding three times. It put a lot of strain on my relationship with Noah. But we’re on good terms now.”

J KATHLEEN GIBSON “*Kicking and Screaming* came early in my career. My first credit as editor was on a small independent film called *Shakes the Clown* by Bobcat Goldthwaite. That was a whirlwind experience. I did an Eddie Murphy film called *Boomerang* back in New York and then I got a call from my agent and met with Noah. We had this great meeting, he was smart, generous and a fellow New Yorker. I got hired.”

JOSH HAMILTON “I was still very conflicted about my career as an actor. I started a theatre company with Ethan Hawke and the writer Jonathan Marc Sherman. I was about to work with them when the second call for *Kicking and Screaming* came in. I had this crisis of deciding whether I could drop out of this play. But I knew I couldn’t say no to a script this great. They were pissed, yeah.”

OLIVIA D’ABO “There were problems getting the financing, initially. We needed to get Eric Stoltz as his name was valuable.”

RANA JOY GLICKMAN “Joel Kastelberg and I made a film together called *Sleep with Me* which starred Eric Stoltz and Parker Posey. A producer called Michael Mendelsohn committed to me and Joel that he would fund *Kicking and Screaming* when we were at Cannes with *Sleep with Me*. Joel and I thought we had the funding in pocket, and we started to build the movie. Last minute, things were not working out with Michael. I ended up going to a bond company because I wanted to retain my relationship with all the crew members. Then they sent me to Trimark, which was a company owned by Mark Amin. At the time, Trimark was so a product-making machine. They had released movies like *Leprechaun*, *Kickboxer* sequels, lots of video erotica... They were a B-movie company. They had just made a movie called *Federal Hill* which was a bit more in that indie spirit, and they were thinking that they wanted to get in on the game a bit more. They thought that getting into business with Joel and I was a classy move. So, they dangled the carrot... Trimark said they’d fund the picture, but we had to bump a few of these young cast members.”

JOSH HAMILTON “Noah was really bummed when it got cancelled the first time. He wasn’t all that communicative, so after I was told that it was finished, I didn’t really know what happened next. I realised later, that one of the reasons I didn’t hear from him is that the investors who came in did not want me in the lead. I think Noah was a little embarrassed at that.”

RANA JOY GLICKMAN "They wanted to bump Carlos Jacott. They approved Parker Posey, and they also approved Chris Eigeman who has been in Whit Stillman's *Metropolitan*."

CHRIS EIGEMAN "I grew up out west, milking cows every morning with guns going off in the background, but then my first role was the cummerbund-wearing demon spawn of F Scott Fitzgerald and that's how I was minted. You can't complain about these things."

MARY JANE FORT "*Metropolitan* by Whit Stillman was my first movie as costume designer. I answered an ad in *The Hollywood Reporter* for that job. On that movie I met Chris Eigeman."

JOSH HAMILTON "All I knew is that it was going again and this time with Josh Charles. He's a friend of mine and we were often up against each other for parts. But I was doing another play, and I was just starting rehearsals when I got a call from Noah saying the movie was going and Josh Charles had dropped out. He said that he was trying to get me back in it and all that I needed to do was have a phone conversation with the money people and convince them I was funny. And there's nothing harder than making money people laugh. And over the phone. They seemed to be appeased."

RANA JOY GLICKMAN "Joel and I worked to try and see through Noah's vision of the movie, so I told Trimark that unless all

the actors stayed, we were walkin'. Then I suggested we could write in a role for Eric Stoltz. To which they replied, 'can you get Eric Stoltz again?' I said I'd try. He was shooting *Rob Roy* in Scotland at the time. So I like to imagine Eric was stood there in a kilt receiving this emergency fax which said something like, "Stoltz - trouble with Noah's picture, need you for to-be-written part. Will you do it?" To which he said yes. Then I had to go to Noah with this proposition. Which was not a good thing because he didn't like people messing with his material. It's a great example of how in low budget film, limitation works hand-in-hand with creativity. In the end, Stoltz was a vital part of the film."

OLIVIA D'ABO "Initially they wanted me for the Parker Posey role. I thought it was great, and obviously Parker did a tremendous job, but the thing is that I'm kind of a nerd at heart. I really wanted to take a stab at reading for Jane. Noah said yes but, 'You have to convince me.' So I went in the room and read again and I remember this little twinkle in his eye and a smile on his face. He looked at me like, 'I'm glad you convinced me.'"

CARA BUONO "Kate was a familiar person to me. I grew up in the Bronx. And that's the real Bronx, not Riverdale or anywhere like that. When they were casting, they actually told me that my accent sounded fake, and I remember telling them that they'd probably just been hearing lots of actual fake accents, so a real one didn't sound right to them. I

remember I wanted a specific hairstyle for the movie. It had to be big, but also fluffy. Every night I'd go home and braid my hair, so when you undid it, there was this effect. It took forever, but I was so happy."

J KATHLEEN GIBSON "Before we started working together, Noah had sent me a list of films he was influenced by. He's a big Truffaut fan and he explained that these films were important to him for this project. I tried to see as many as I could. I remember *Jules et Jim* was on there. That was a big one as that influenced some of the transitions and visual effects in the film. Chris Marker's *La Jetée*. I mentioned I'd seen that and I think he was impressed. Ten points to me!"

MARY JANE FORT "Parker Posey was at the time a thrift shop queen, and I remember she wanted to come with me to look for costumes. And usually you're like, "Oh no, please don't..." But I remember she and I heading all over LA and coming back with trash bags full of clothes and dumping them all out. We had to work out how we could make it not look completely rag-tag. At the same time, they couldn't look like they just walked out of a thrift store. Our offices were in some warehouse somewhere, and I thought I would be heading out to the San Fernando Valley every day. But it was in Santa Monica, so I didn't have to drive for two hours!"

JOSH HAMILTON "I didn't know LA at all well. They put me in a little apartment on the west side of town, and then they gave me the address of the first day of

shooting. It was a café on Santa Monica Boulevard, and I thought, 'Ahh, I know where that is!' I thought I'd just drive all the way down Santa Monica. But not being familiar with LA traffic, it literally took me two hours longer than I thought it would. This was before cellphones so I was late for the first day. I was a wreck by the time I got there. I thought I would be fired. I was shooting with Olivia and I was covered in flop sweat for the entire day."

OLIVIA D'ABO "I will always remember what Josh Hamilton brought out of me as an actor. Jane wears a retainer that she takes out in the middle of talking. It's almost like she uses it as a tool, like it's connected to her mind and thoughts. It emphasises her point of view. I think when most actors are playing a role, it becomes an extension of who they are. There was a lot of Jane in me at the time. There still is."

JOSH HAMILTON "Olivia was delightful. I remember my girlfriend at the time was named Jane, so it was very apropos."

OLIVIA D'ABO "I hope Noah's not going to be mad at me for saying this, but he did date a girl in college who was Jane. So I think, by me really trying to convince him that I was Jane... he had something very specific in his mind, so it's an honour that he decided to cast me."

JOSH HAMILTON "There's actually something I do now which makes me think of Olivia every time I do it. Before every take, she would... I don't know what you'd call it, but she would relax her face and she

would shake it and breath out and make this noise... motor-boating, maybe? And now, when I want to loosen up the muscles in my face, I'll do that. It was so cute when she'd do it. I'd be quiet, trying to get into this meditative state, and she'd be next to me making this very loud noise."

JOHN LEHR "It was noticeable that this was Noah's first movie, but right out of the gate, he seemed very comfortable. There are some directors who try too hard to make you feel like they know what they're doing by being dickheads, but Noah wasn't like that at all. I think comedians have a tendency to perform rather than act, and Noah actually had a way of harnessing that. As he got more and more confident, he had more of a specific vision which he achieved without making you feel like you were just a puppet."

JOSH HAMILTON "It's a pretty melancholy film, but it didn't feel melancholy when we were shooting. Primarily because of Carlos Jacott. Shooting scenes with him just involved trying to keep a straight face."

CHRIS EIGEMAN "What I remember most clearly is just being in an awe of Carlos. I just saw him as this absolute titan of comedy. And that's really what the film was, a comedy. It was one of those typical things where we were ruining so many takes because we couldn't stop ourselves from laughing. We were all very happy to be there, the joy you see on screen reflects the joy we felt on set."

CARA BUONO "Everyone was so funny. I loved just watching Chris Eigeman's reactions to things. There was that scene in the cafeteria where he asks for a potato... It just cracked me up."

JOHN LEHR "That's who Chris Eigeman is. He is that guy. I remember when we were shooting *Highball* together, between takes he'd be sat there quietly reading 'Anna Karenina'."

JOSH HAMILTON "Elliot Gould was such a towering figure in my film-going experience. The thing about Elliot is that he's... childlike, but in the most positive sense. The day we shot the scenes where he visits the campus, we were just standing there and talking, and I was in awe of him. He launched in to talking about how he had become famous before he knew who he was. We talked about how he was the first American actor Ingmar Bergman used. It took him years to discover who he was as a person without all the fame stuff. So he was talking and talking, and then there was this sudden pause. He looked up and said, 'Well, the trees know.' And I nodded. I was trying to figure out whether that was a non-sequitur or whether there was a segue there. But no. 'The trees know.' I always thought, what a crazy thing to say. Now that I'm older, I completely agree with him."

MARY JANE FORT "There's a line in the film where Chris Eigeman says to Carlos Jacott's character, 'Are you wearing... pyjamas?' while they're at a formal party. We were working together and we were trying to come up with what

was different and weird and interested. He had the pyjamas on and thought it was funny, then we added the suit jacket, showed it to Noah, and he thought it was funny and – in my memory – he added that line in and the one later where he's wearing mascara."

J KATHLEEN GIBSON "Because of the budget there weren't a lot of takes and there weren't a lot of different angles. There were times we wanted to do something different, but there just wasn't the material. There were quite a few long takes, and I'm not a 'cutty' editor anyway. I always feel that editing should be invisible, and viewers should be able to fall into a story and not be aware of any simulation. I was relieved when he saw that first cut. He didn't talk to me very much about what he was looking for, he just let me do it."

RANA JOY GLICKMAN "Noah and I sometimes didn't get along too great because I brought my dog to the office every day. Da Vinci had dreadlocks and he was part of why *Kicking and Screaming* got financed. One of the producers at Trimark wanted him in the film, to be the dog of the boys' house. And we shot scenes with him, but he ended up getting cut out. Da Vinci ended up being in another film which was shot by Steve Bernstein. He was in a scene with Flea."

JOSH HAMILTON "I was in Cannes because I'd just worked on a film called *The Proprietor* straight after *Kicking and*

Screaming. Noah had a buyer's screening over there and he invited me along as I hadn't seen it. It was horrible. People were just walking in and out. They decide 10 minutes in they didn't want to buy it, so they head for the door. I remember being mortified by my performance, thinking I had destroyed the film."

J KATHLEEN GIBSON "I wasn't present on the production. I got a cut together and we sat together and watched it. And he was very happy. He had the movie that he wanted. We spent some time together trimming it back, and the clock was ticking as we were trying to get it into Cannes. We were working late into the night to meet our deadlines."

CARA BUONO "Eric Stoltz and I did a pilot a few years ago where we were played co-workers at the *New York Times*, but it wasn't picked up, and we talked about what a fun time we had making that movie."

JOHN LEHR "After this movie, there was a group of us who used to meet for lunch on Sunday in LA. It was Chris Eigeman, Eric Stoltz, me, Dean Cameron who played the magician in *Highball*, Chris Reid, Carlos would come occasionally. Aaron Sorkin even came along to a few of 'em when he started on *The West Wing*. We'd always go to the same place on Melrose. We called it TV Dinners. We'd just all meet and say how much we hated working in television."

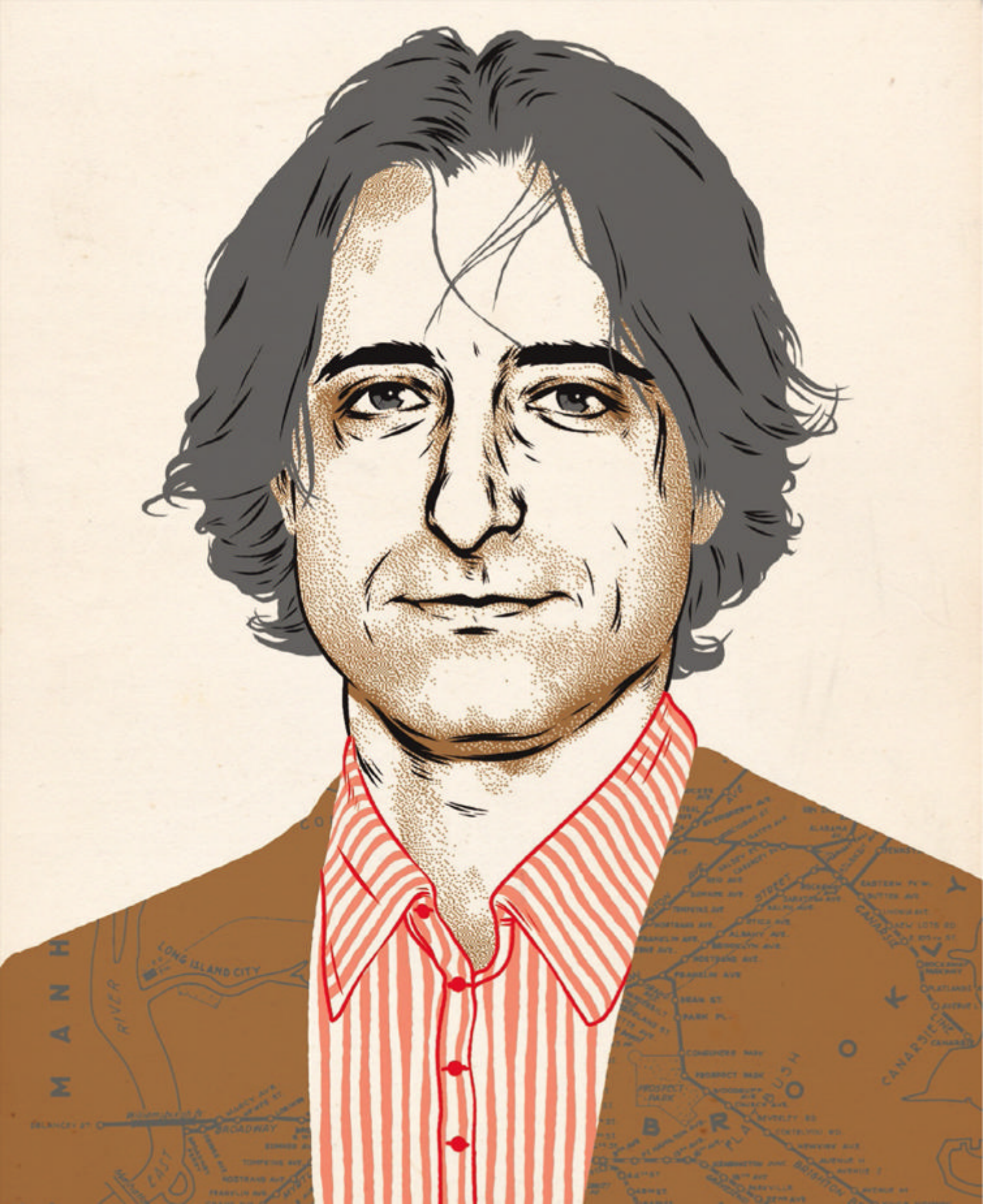
J KATHLEEN GIBSON "A bunch of us ended up going to the New York Film Festival screening, and I remember Noah

commented that we'd all brought our mothers with us. Really wonderful. It's a feeling you get on small films – that you're part of a family. It's very tight knit. When everyone went away, I remember talking to Noah and him saying, 'My family are all gone.'"

OLIVIA D'ABO "Oddly enough I just saw Carlos when I was doing an episode of *Psych* with Vinnie Jones, which was like a take-off of *Sexy Beast* and Guy Ritchie. We were playing these criminals who were stealing the crown jewels. Anyway, Carlos is a writer on it, so I got to hang out with him. It was absolutely brilliant."

JOSH HAMILTON: "Noah and Eric and I actually bought a brownstone together in New York back in the late '90s. For years we actually shared a house together. A few years after we did that, I was doing a play with Jennifer Jason-Leigh, and I introduced her to Noah and they ended up getting married. He moved out of the apartment and kept it as a part time office. For years I was waiting for him to sell it to me, and he eventually did. In 2014, he finally did. So I still live there."

CHRIS EIGEMAN: "I think it's fantastic that people still come up to me in restaurants and give me some piece of paper or a coaster that says, 'Broken glass' and then walk away. So yeah, I think it's a great thing. It's great that it meant something when it came out and that it's holding up to this day"



MAN

WORDS BY **DAVID EHRLICH**

ABOUT

YOU CAN TAKE THE MOVIE DIRECTOR OUT OF NEW YORK... *LWLIES* TALKS TO NOAH BAUMBACH ABOUT THE CITY HE LOVES AND THE MISCHIEVOUS KICK HE GETS FROM BEING CRANKY ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE.

ILLUSTRATION BY **TIMBA SMITS**

TOWN

“I

don't own Brooklyn anymore.” It's a hard thing for Noah Baumbach to admit, as it would be for anyone born and raised in one of the slanted brownstones that line the verdant hills of Park Slope. “I'm lost there. Going back the other day with Greta,” he confesses, volunteering a glimpse into his storied relationship with girlfriend and collaborator Greta Gerwig, “she was suggesting I take the R train, and I was like, ‘I can't take the R to Park Slope! I have to take the 2/3 to Flatbush or the D to 7th Avenue.’ I can't adjust to the new ways of these old neighbourhoods.”

For Baumbach, change is the cause and solution to all of life's problems, and the same holds true for the people he creates to populate his films. They are fixated upon the challenges and urgencies of transition. The protagonists of his films don't lean in to change, they see it as a threat graver than death, doing everything in their power to delay or deny it. “I think I'm interested in how we either lose ourselves or gain ourselves – or keep ourselves – as we go through big life experiences,” Baumbach deduces, the faint note of discovery in his voice suggesting that he doesn't often pause to identify with his work.

Of course, if he did, he would have noticed that adjusting is what he does best. This, even more than his comparatively calm demeanour (our conversation took place after Baumbach's mid-morning yoga class), is what separates Baumbach from his characters, a distinction that viewers have been hard-pressed to make since the filmmaker candidly mined his parents' divorce for 2005's *The Squid and the Whale*. “I was probably too open with some things I said about that movie, and I felt like I paid for it. The truth was that a lot of that movie was personal, but not all of it was autobiographical. It's funny, because with all of the movies that I've made since then, I'm often surprised that people don't catch how personal they are – they assume I said it all in *The Squid and the Whale*.”

While We're Young, more than anything else Baumbach has made since, is poised to change that. His latest film (at least until *Mistress America*, his recent Sundance smash, is released later in 2015) centres around a guy in his forties named Josh Srebnick (played by Ben Stiller) who resents the thought of middle age so fervently that he and his wife begin to pal around with a couple of fresh-faced Williamsburg “hipsters” (Adam Driver and Amanda Seyfried), overeager to adopt the generational affects that seduced them to these new friends. It's one of three exceptionally youthful movies that Baumbach, now 45, has made in the three years since he began dating his *Frances Ha* star and co-writer, a 31-year-old who rose up in a series of millennial “mumblecore” films that played like a precocious rebuke to the articulate and almost perilously overeducated comedies upon which Baumbach and his contemporaries first made their names. Lest it

seem incidental that Stiller's character in *While We're Young* is a filmmaker in the midst of creative stagnation, Baumbach draws enough parallels to clear things up: “There's definitely a thing in the movie of me recognising myself in my own life as a grown up, in recognising myself as no longer the youngest person in the room,” he declares, indicating the kind of rooms in which he's recently been finding himself.

But Baumbach has always been one step ahead of his characters, writing with one eye on the rear-view mirror. *Kicking and Screaming*, the acerbic 1995 comedy that launched his career, followed a cast of college graduates who were paralysed by the endless possibility of the real world – Baumbach himself was only 25 at the time. With *The Squid and the Whale*, he vividly revisited one of the most uncertain times of his life, Jesse Eisenberg serving as the director's teenage proxy. “I think some of my films – *The Squid and the Whale*, *Greenberg*, *Kicking and Screaming*, – are about trying to shut the world down, in a way. It's like, ‘How can I have no experience?’”

While We're Young suggests that wanting to have a certain experience may not always be enough. “In this one, they don't know how to go about it, and they're not conscious enough of it to go to couples therapy or do something in a healthier way to shake things up, but they know on some level that something has gotta change. I think middle age brings that up in a way that it doesn't for college kids, when you still have the luxury to do nothing for a year.”



The film is an equal-opportunity offender, but millennials take the brunt of the sniper fire, Baumbach targeting them with the merciless precision of a distanced perspective. It's all there in that name: Darby. Darby. “I think I heard somebody talking about a group of people and they referred to someone named Darby and I totally had some idea immediately who this person is. And then there's a Kris Kristofferson song where Darby is a character, and I kind of went to that and thought whoever the cool person was who parented this kid pulled that out.”

But Darby's name doesn't mean that she and Jamie are necessarily the villains of *While We're Young*. In fact, Baumbach shows great sympathy for the devil, the relationship between Josh and Jamie being rooted in a most unexpected place: “I was interested in how Josh empowers Jamie to be the bad guy, because he invests so much in them that they don't deserve or warrant. It's like the tagline for *Blade Runner* – I used to have the poster in my room – was like ‘Man has made his match, now it's his problem.’ That's why that section of the movie was like my version of a paranoid thriller. It's Josh's drama,

it's what he's working through, and Jamie is only the villain because Josh made him the hero. He's neither, really." Baumbach hums for a moment, trying to suss out what he's forgotten to say on the subject. Then: "But it doesn't mean that I can't be cranky about young people!"

While We're Young might be the broadest thing that Baumbach has ever made, but it's still a modestly budgeted indie comedy (albeit one with a quartet of genuine movie stars – a quintet if you count Charles Grodin – a Beastie Boy, and super producer Scott Rudin). Sandwiched between the comparatively guerrilla, run-and-gun productions of *Frances Ha* and *Mistress America*, however, this might as well be Baumbach's *Avatar*. But he insists that it's all part of a unified approach: "One of my favourite shots in the movie is Ben and Adam crossing Park Avenue before he goes to the hedge fund guy because it's just them in the city. We didn't close anything down. We had fewer shooting days on *While We're Young* because it's just a bigger animal, but there are also things that come from having more money that are helpful and make things run more efficiently, so the more I'm doing this, the more I'm finding a hybrid version of these off-the-radar movies so there's less and less difference between how they're made."

It's not just that Baumbach is good at transitioning from one thing to the next, he also seems to genuinely enjoy it. The characters in his films are so brutal towards one another that the sting of their shared bitterness tends to scar, but reflecting on where he leaves them reveals a surprisingly consistent residue of optimism. The three movies he's made since finishing *Greenberg* and returning to New York have percolated with a happiness that can be difficult to reconcile with the domestic destruction of *The Squid and the Whale*, or Jennifer Jason Leigh (Baumbach's wife at the time) shitting her pants in 2007's *Margot at the Wedding*. "I do think that with *Squid* and *Margot* and *Greenberg*, there was a real comic drive for me in writing those things, and they all came out sadder, and maybe in some cases more upsetting than I had imagined them being. In making things, you lead them and they lead you."

But, as a result of the dramatic changes in Baumbach's personal and working life, are his recent films actually happier than his earlier stuff, or are they just codified that way? "After *Squid* I was driven to go to those darker places. With *While We're Young*, the kind of movie I wanted to make was just different from those. I wanted to do something that felt more like a Jim Brooks movie or a Mike Nichols movie, something that a studio would have made in the '80s when I was a teenager. Elements of *Greenberg* and *Margot* just wouldn't be appropriate for that movie. This movie should feel happy at the end. It's my version of a certain kind of comedy, whereas I think with *Margot* I felt like I had a different kind of responsibility to that story, but I don't find that either of them are any less 'me' or more 'me' now. I guess the ones I'm making now have to be more 'me' because it's what I'm interested in and it's what I'm doing. But I could certainly see myself going back to doing a movie that was rougher around the edges."

"I LOVED 'THE HOBBIT' AS A KID BECAUSE I LOVE THAT IDEA OF LEAVING YOUR PROTECTED WORLD AND GOING OUT INTO DANGER AND COMING RIGHT BACK."

One thing that Baumbach probably can't see himself going back to doing is shooting away from New York for any extended period of time. Indeed, his relationship with his hometown is another thing he shares in common with his characters, who reliably leave the city on a truth-seeking quest of some kind, only to return with newfound clarity. *While We're Young* is all about getting out of your comfort zones, both the allure of it and also the potentially destructive nature of it. "I think probably all my movies deal with a wrestling match between comfort and discomfort, or comfort and adventure. I loved *The Hobbit* as a kid because I love that idea of leaving your protected world and going out into danger and coming right back."

Now that he's back, how does Baumbach feel about his once and current home? "Greenberg came at the end of a few years where I had been spending probably equal time in New York and LA, and I was trying very hard to like LA. I do think that the last few years have, for many reasons, made me feel more at home in New York again than I had before, and more connected to it both from my own history here and also from my present here." Shortly after returning from LA, Baumbach moved to Manhattan. He may not own Brooklyn anymore, but he's managed to keep himself intact as he crossed the East River. To borrow a line from the movie named after Baumbach's new island home, "New York was his town, and it always would be." 🍷

"BEGUILING...TOUCHING...INTOXICATING"



Heat



Little White Lies



Entertainment Weekly

Ryan
REYNOLDS

Gemma
ARTERTON

Anna
KENDRICK

The
VOICES

A FILM BY MARJANE SATRAPI

*If you hear them
You're losing your head*

YODA PANDA! DUFFY! COME BACK! YOU'VE BEEN A GOOD BOY! PRODUCED BY PHILIPPA MILES & MARJANE SATRAPI
STORY BY SHELLY SEARS & JEFFREY M. HOFFMAN PRODUCED BY MARJANE SATRAPI & PHILIPPA MILES
SCREENPLAY BY MARJANE SATRAPI & PHILIPPA MILES CASTING BY ANNE HARRIS & JANE ROBERTS
GEMMA ARTERTON ANNA KENDRICK JACK WILSON MARY KERNELL ELLA HENNESSY KARAN AARON DAVID DAVENPORT
PHILIPPA MILES MARJANE SATRAPI JAMES STANLEY MARCEL GUTHER GEMMA ARTERTON REBECCA STAPPELTON JACQUELINE JONES
PRODUCTION DESIGNER ALEXANDER JONES DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY JEFFREY M. HOFFMAN EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS
CARYL SCHWARTZ ADAM STONE JEFFREY M. HOFFMAN PRODUCED BY MARJANE SATRAPI & PHILIPPA MILES
EDITED BY MICHAEL B. PERRY EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS PHILIPPA MILES & MARJANE SATRAPI
A FILM BY MARJANE SATRAPI



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Lauren Boglio

A Noah Baumbach symposium — With each film channelled through a single object.



Kicking AND Screaming

- ON PHIL MARSHALL'S ORIGINAL SCORE -

The films of Noah Baumbach are of a distinct writerly persuasion. His characters talk, debate and bicker among themselves, throwing verbal darts at one another while tossing humorous asides to only the most attentive listeners. It's the voluble nature of Baumbach's work, coupled with the personal, small-scale ambition of his narratives, which has led many critics to easy and inevitable comparisons to the French filmmakers of the Nouvelle Vague – and particularly to one of the movement's most enduring figures, François Truffaut. As such, Baumbach's films don't lend themselves particularly well to considerations of production or design elements, just as his dialogue and situational irony tend to convey much of the drama, rather than peripheral accoutrements such as music.

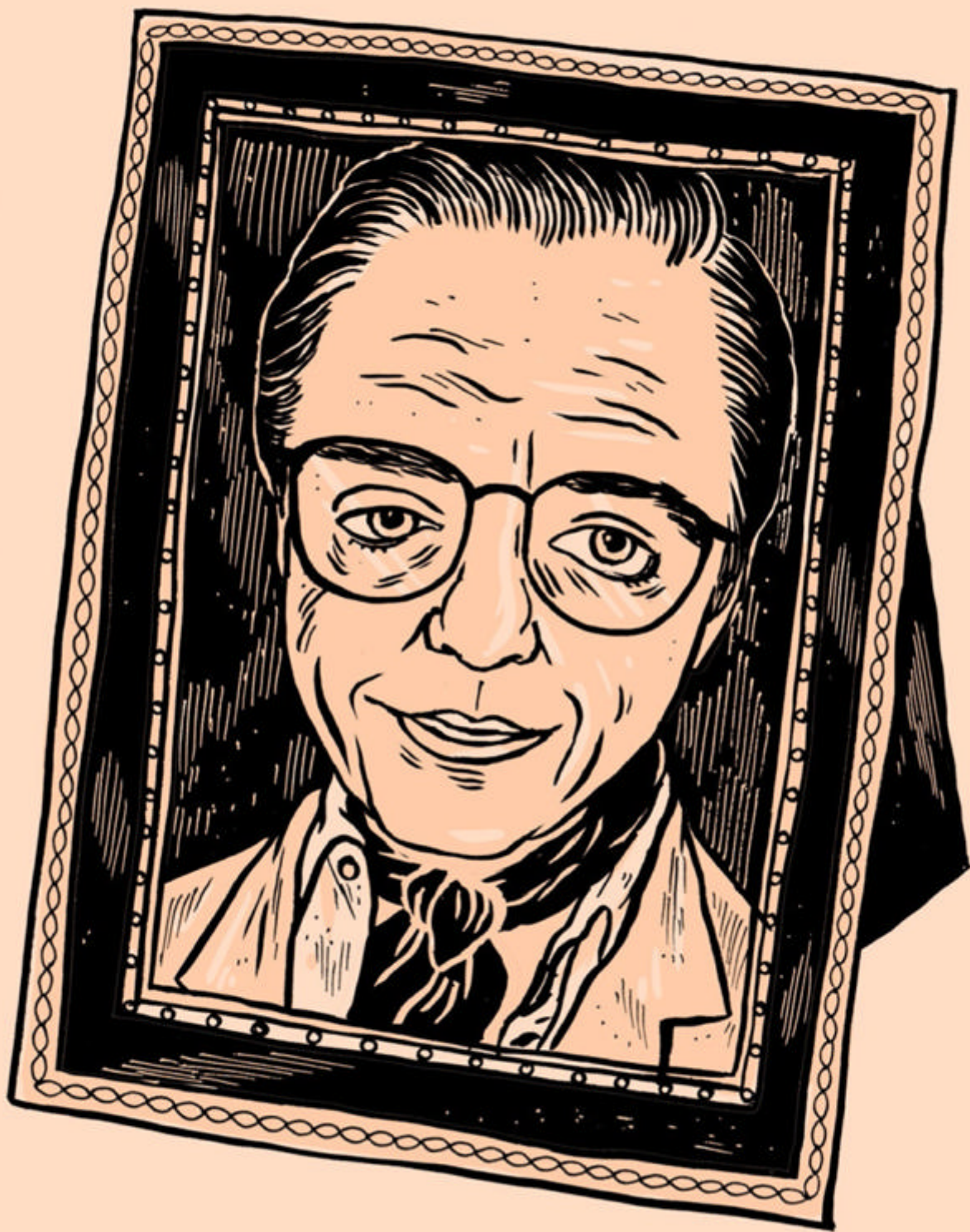
By that same token, Baumbach is rather expert in his implementation of pre-existing pop and rock songs. From Albert Hammond Jr's 'It Never Rains in Southern California' and Galaxie 500's 'Strange' in *Greenberg*, to the multiple versions of Pink Floyd's 'Hey You' featured in *The Squid and the Whale*, to the array of early-'90s college rock classics in *Kicking and Screaming*, it's obvious that Baumbach's well of music knowledge runs just as deep as his literary and cinematic reserve. How is it, then, that the most memorable and affecting aural cue in Baumbach's catalogue remains a subtle piece of original music written for the most loquacious and quotable of his films?

Kicking and Screaming, in many ways also the director's most indelible work, remains one of the great debuts of the 1990s, a preternaturally confident film of offhand humour and bittersweet insight. In it, a group of recent college graduates spend the summer procrastinating on various vocational prospects and philosophising on their purpose within life's greater narrative. There's Max (Chris Eigeman), cynical about everything except the established collegiate camaraderie he's set to leave behind; Otis (Carlos Jacott), endlessly optimistic but cripplingly anxious about the future; Skippy (Jason Wiles), seemingly confident yet content to stick around campus to pursue a long-term relationship with his younger girlfriend Miami (Parker Posey); and, finally, Grover (Josh Hamilton), who begins the film by breaking up with his significant other, Jane (Olivia d'Abo), only to spend the remainder of it pining over her choice to study in Prague and his not to join her abroad.

The film proceeds in unassumingly undramatic fashion, unfolding through a succession of flashbacks while accumulating gravity via trivial conversations and chance encounters. On the page, it likely reads in an aimless manner not unlike the free-associative banter between its characters. In an interview produced for the Criterion Collection in 2006, Baumbach recalls the conscious concern he felt while piecing together the final film, specifically over the story's transitions between time periods. As mentioned, the film's opening sequence ends with Grover and Jane breaking up, each griping about the other's personality traits and idiosyncrasies. We never see Jane again in the present tense, but we glimpse the origins of her and Grover's relationship as the narrative moves back in time on multiple occasions, charting their progression from intellectual rivals to tentative acquaintances to a pair of young adults on the verge of irreconcilable romance. The film therefore essentially ends at the beginning, and with one of the American cinema's most heartbreaking gestures of unforeseen consequence.

In order to connect these parallel stories, Baumbach enlisted the services of Phil Marshall, a workmanlike composer who has mostly traded in the fields of television and documentary but whose modest musical sensibilities adapted well to the director's intimate intentions. His finished score – in Baumbach's words, "very touching and simple" – consists of but a few elements, namely gentle waves of synth and hints of acoustic guitar, yet in each overlapping chord lies an entire spectrum of emotional inertia. Employed as it is only when the film's narrative jumps back in time, the theme is irreducibly nostalgic in tone and thus inextricably linked with the character of Jane, whose very presence seems to summon the music's slowly mounting ambience.

Baumbach's visual counterpart to the score – a kind of time-lapse progression of still photographs inspired by the montage editing of Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) – is likewise indispensable to the nagging sense of naivety and helpless romanticism which accompanies each flashback. Thus, on the one hand, it's an effective structuring device; on the other, it's an audiovisual motif as memorable as any of the characters' more witty banter. There's a wistful, sepia-tinged aura to these moments of nascent passion, and they're enough to engender hope even with evidence of events to come, thereby accomplishing what all great cinema should. It makes you believe



Mr Jealousy

- ON THE ACTOR AND DIRECTOR PETER BOGDANOVICH -

The casting of Peter Bogdanovich as a psychiatrist in *The Sopranos* was witty and suggestive in the best way. David Chase's landmark series about a mama's-boy capo Freudian slipping his way through life was filled with allusions to other gangster dramas from *Scarface* on down, and who better to play master analyst than the man who once literally wrote the book on Howard Hawks? Bogdanovich's Dr Eliot Kupferburg was a relatively minor character – he was the psychiatrist for Dr Melfi (Lorraine Bracco), who got a lot more screen-time as Tony Soprano's regular shrink – but his presence went a long way towards contextualising and clarifying Chase's cinephilic project. He also got the last diagnostic word in edgewise about the series' eponymous protagonist, explaining to Melfi once and for all that Tony was a sociopath and would never change.

Let it be said that Noah Baumbach got there first, however. Two years before *The Sopranos* debuted, the director roped in Bogdanovich to play a therapist with the unlikely name of Dr Poke in his third feature, *Mr Jealousy*. A hybrid filmmaker-critic who functions as the historical link between the *Cahiers du Cinéma* and Quentin Tarantino, Bogdanovich didn't age as gracefully (onscreen) as some of his easy-riding/bull-raging contemporaries, but Baumbach (and Chase) took pains to pay him respect anyway. In a film whose plot turns on a character lying about attending a revival screening of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* to cover up a clandestine meeting with a romantic rival, the maker of the AFI documentary *Directed by John Ford* is akin to a guarantor of authenticity.

Eric Stoltz's wannabe author Lester Grimm, who reports to his suspicious girlfriend Ramona (Annabella Sciora) that Ford's beautifully shot black-and-white classic was “in glorious colour,” definitely doesn't know much as he thinks he does about cinema. But when he enrolls in Dr Poke's group therapy session – albeit under an assumed name and mostly to spy on Ramona's more literarily successful ex-boyfriend – the implication is that he's in good hands. Bogdanovich slides effortlessly into the role of wise guru, probably because he's been playing it since his salad days turning out monographs about Orson Welles and pitch-perfect pastiches of bygone genres (*Paper Moon*, *What's Up Doc*).

Mr Jealousy takes place in the same gentrified, culture-vulture-infested version of New York familiar from films by Woody Allen, and it may be Allen who Lester and his friends are referring to when they meet on the screen after a matinee screening of an “American independent film.” “Not one of his better ones” is their blithely dismissive communal assessment. It's possible to read this diss as Baumbach dropping the gauntlet, *Last Picture Show* style, for his Sundance Kid contemporaries, especially since the rest of the movie drenched in reverence for older films: not only Liberty Valance, which it mirrors by having contriving scenarios where people continually speak and act (although never murder) on behalf of others, but also Jules and Jim, from which it borrows a number of Georges Delerue musical cues and the device of an omniscient off-screen narrator (voiced by Baumbach himself, à la François Truffaut in *Two English Girls*).

Viewed today, *Mr Jealousy* seems in some ways a relic of late '90s indie cinema. Its hyper-articulate, upwardly mobile characters, the most memorable of whom is played by Carlos Jacott as a more milquetoast variation on George Costanza, have since been largely replaced by mumblecore mopers or Apatowian man-children. But there are also present-tense resonances: Alex Ross Perry's more acidic and less romantic *Listen Up Philip* also takes bookish competitiveness as its subject and utilises a very similar voiceover conceit. A scene where Chris Eigeman's callow novelist Dashiell Frank is referred to as the “voice of a generation” anticipates Hannah Horvath's careerist fretting on *Girls*.

Whether these connections are direct or just reflective of Baumbach's own ascent, alongside his pal and sometime collaborator Wes Anderson, to the forefront of the urbane-American-auteurism originally codified by Allen and Bogdanovich (whose influence was palpable on *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is hard to say. But either way, *Mr Jealousy* feels very much like what Drs Kupferburg or Poke might call in clinical terms a primal scene. It's also still Baumbach's funniest and most intricately written movie to date: absolutely one of his better ones 🍷



Highball

- ON A BOTTLE OF MALIBU -

There is little in the world more irritating than arriving at a party when everyone else in the room is already soused and engaged in insincere, feedback loop-like conversations and venal wars of intellectual attrition. 1997's *Highball*, a film from which Noah Baumbach ended up removing his name (it's credited to one "Ernie Fusco") expands on this thesis, playing like the traffic-light shooter version of Luis Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel*. Three separate soirees take place in the dimly-lit Brooklyn apartment of Travis (Christopher Reed) and Diane (Lauren Katz), a comically ill-matched wannabe power couple desperate to present themselves as grand arbiters of waggish discourse and tipsy *bon mots*. What they in fact achieve is the perfect conditions for three different-but-similar evenings of private and public hell.

It almost seems like a critical reflex reaction to sing the praises of a movie considered a creative write-off, especially now that its maker has attained a measure of celebrity within the rarified domain of indie/alt cinema. And yet *Highball* is a film whose script – with jokes pressure-packed into every scene – recalls the raffish screwball confections of Lubitsch, Sturges and Hecht. Sure, some jokes are funnier than others, but the sheer bombardment of quality lines more than compensates for the lo-fi production values and the fact that, in place of a plot, the idea of the film is to present variations on a single theme.

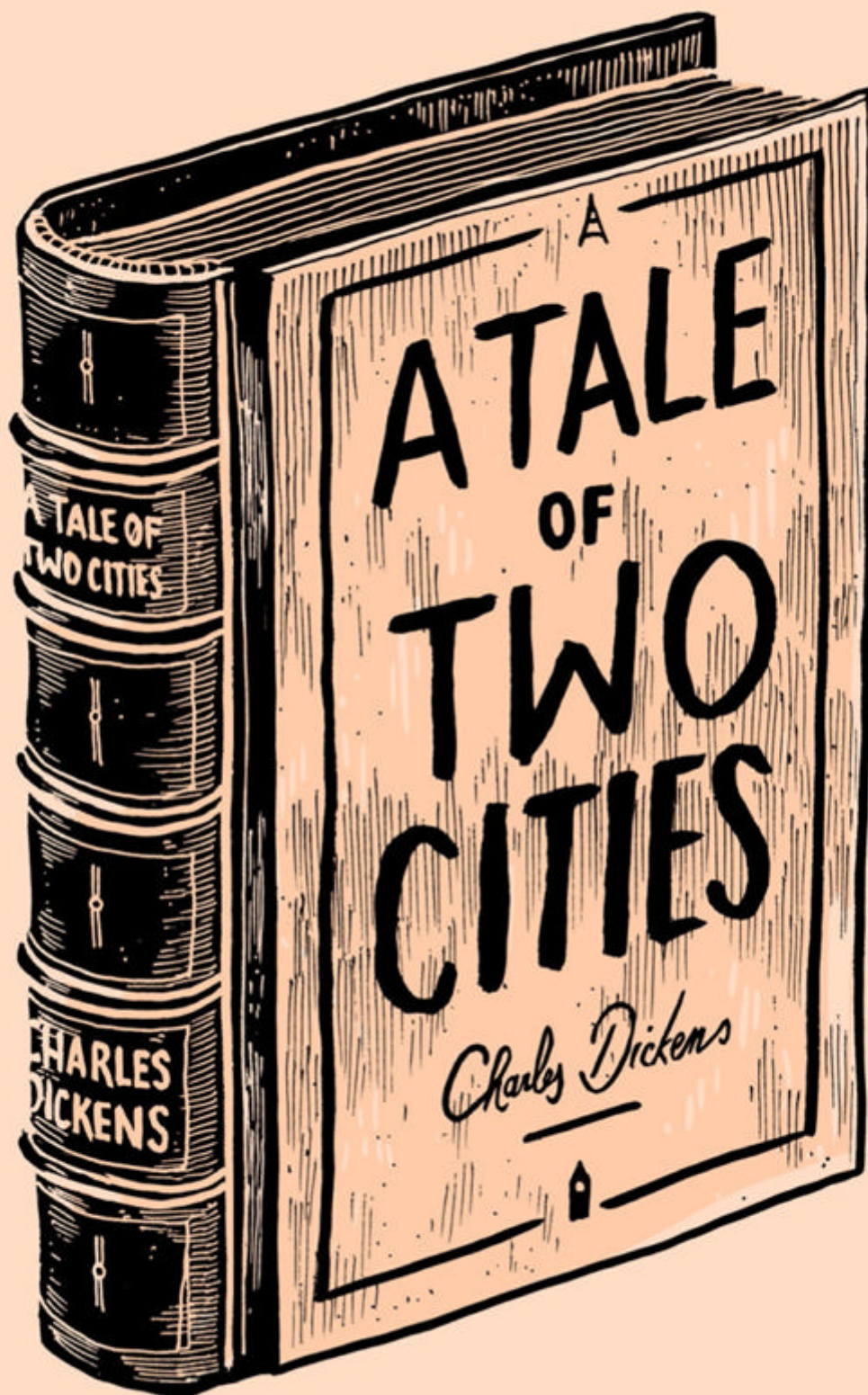
As the title suggests, this is cinema as three noxious yet colourful cocktails. The apartment is the punch bowl and the characters are the spirits and mixers, each one boasting a different flavour and alcoholic potency. Sometimes, we're given an olive or decorative paper umbrella in the form of '90s Hollywood celebrities playing themselves – Ally Sheedy and Rae Dawn Chong – each on the arm of Eric Stoltz, himself the most high profile player among the remainder of the cast. The process of watching the film involves testing how each individual ingredient works together prior to adding it into the mix. Yet during this test period, Baumbach gets high on his own supply, and by the end just opts to produce something that's as sweet and toxic as physically possible.

One of the funniest jokes involves a character – Carlos Jacott's eternally grouchy Felix – being given the option of two drinks: one is a pint of "home brew", concocted in a laundry cupboard by Travis and

already judged by guests (including Felix) at a previous party as being undrinkably foul; the other is a wee dram o' Malibu. Felix opts for the home brew. Aside from being a humorous burn of the perennial '70s party favourite, the suggestion is that, at such parties, pleasure can only be attained from unknown quantities. Why would you bother drinking something you already know is fetid when you could take another chance on a rank liquid that at least has the potential for interest. The joke in *Highball* is that, despite the belief that these parties constitute a gathering of great friends and a ritual that will naturally cement old relationships to stand up to harsh weather of time, everyone in the room despises one another.

In Baumbach's debut feature, *Kicking and Screaming*, alcohol was depicted in an extremely romantic light, as a necessary social lubricant, a catalyst for honesty and, in the case of Stolz' divebar philosopher ("I have said before that if Plato is a fine red wine, then Aristotle is a dry Martini"), a professional enabler. Here we see the flip-side; alcohol as a substance that allows you to converse with people you secretly hate and, eventually, express that hatred to their face. Party scenes in movies generally involve scantily clad extras bopping along to loud music and buff revellers flashing come-hither eyes at one another. *Highball* gets to the truth of the matter: parties are awful, awkward, stressful events which people attend more down to a sense of obligation than desire. With the characters here, there's the feeling that coming to these parties is a way to check-off a long list of one-on-one social engagements in one fell swoop.

One other thing that *Highball* does extremely well is demystify the concept of actors pretending to be drunk. There's nothing worse than having to observe some RADA-trained rah-rah going method on their interpretation of what it's like to have downed a quart of Wild Turkey, flailing their arms about, slurring their speech. What Baumbach does is present drunkenness as a simple and natural extension of our existing personalities. If you're already an assbat, no amount of high-strength grog is going to change that. Baumbach must have been drunk when he opted to take his name off a movie which any other comedy director you care to mention would've killed to have made 🍷



THE *Squid* AND THE *Whale*

- ON CHARLES DICKENS' 'A TALE OF TWO CITIES' -

“**M**inor Dickens.” There’s an unsurprising tradition of notable writers despising the most presumably unassailable of their contemporaries and predecessors – George Bernard Shaw’s voluminous hatred for Shakespeare, Nabokov’s loathing of Dostoyevsky, etc. But in *The Squid and the Whale*, this verdict has a pettier charge coming from Bernard Berkman (Jeff Daniels), an American novelist gone to seed. At his Brooklyn dinner table, though, Bernard is still the great man to eldest son Walt (Jesse Eisenberg), who soaks up his dad’s succinct dismissal of ‘A Tale of Two Cities’; trying the posture on for himself later, he takes a blind stab at ‘This Side of Paradise’ as “minor Fitzgerald.”

I’d heard this verdict in regards to this exact title before from my father, which gave me an uneasy stab of recognition when first watching *The Squid and the Whale*. “Relatability,” please note, is not a quality I seek out in movies: on the rare occasion there is identification with someone onscreen, I generally find out something about myself I’d rather not. Still, on second pass I could watch *Squid* without squirming, in part because the resemblances between Bernard and my own dad end rather quickly. A doctor in the dubious “homeopathic” vein, my father was a Russian immigrant with a large-ish library whose English-language offerings were confined to acceptably non-barbaric texts, defined (save Agatha Christie, PG Wodehouse and stray mystery writers) as those written before World War One. Modernism, and what came after, seemed to be nearly as big an offense as the combat itself.

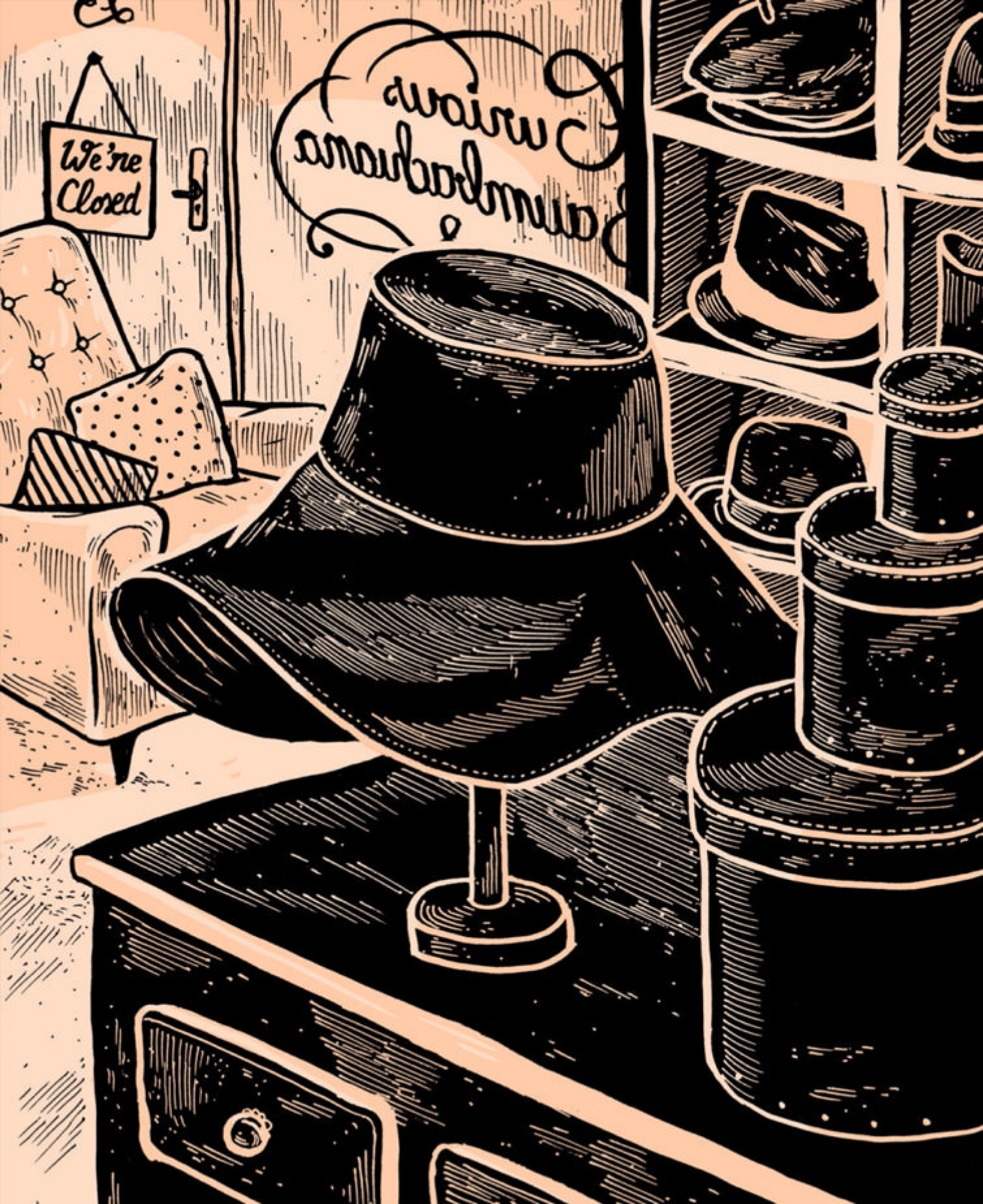
Confined to the relatively small playpen of the Great White Men of European Letters, my father was inevitably going to have an opinion about each and every Dickens novel. A cache of literary knowledge staved off boredom; like Bernard, misanthropy inevitably meant a lot of time alone. (The man did not seem to have a single friendly acquaintance in the US.) These were the appraisals of someone self-styled as a man of refinement and taste (in the Lord Chesterfield sense, a volume of whose letters to his son I received one birthday). Attendant, his verdicts served a different function from Bernard’s, whose bottomless pedantry (a diluted part of my patrimonial inheritance) poorly conceals panic at spiraling into larger literary irrelevance – a very specialised concern passing far beyond the

bounds of any personal experiences growing up.

Nor do I find myself identifying much with Walt, though, if honesty prevails, as a pre-teen it was easy to view my father through the skewed lens of cult of personality – a consequence of too many hours on the couch with nothing to do but read and hear his views, socialisation having been effectively barred by overanxious parenting. This liminal status was sloughed off quicker than Walt manages to, taking several months and a whole movie to learn that arrogant pedantry isn’t the best self-introductory pose.

With his all-enveloping paranoia and a ferocious misanthropy which perversely demanded heartfelt adoration in return, the late Richard M Nixon is the public figure who most reminds me of my father. That doesn’t go for Anthony Hopkins or Philip Baker Hall’s onscreen incarnations, so Bernard Berkman will have to do. Worse yet: five years later, now a devoted fan of Baumbach’s acerbic portraits of human frailty externalised as near-comical monstrousness, a viewing of the film *Greenberg* resulted in an even worse example of relatability. Prepared to sink bottomlessly into my seat as Ben Stiller repeatedly mistreated poor Greta Gerwig, unreserved cackling throughout was the surprising upshot. Roger Greenberg is an even worse misanthrope than Bernard, with fewer achievements to point to in compensation for being incapable of concealing his instant, unearned disdain for others. But he’s funny: he gets good lines and it’s easy to relate to his irascibility – which is missing the film’s obvious point about the perils – to self and others – of letting this aspect of one’s personality flourish unchecked.

Given the perils of unpleasant identification with what’s on-screen, it’s good to see that Baumbach’s apparently in a kinder mood now. *Frances Ha* made absolute sense as a portrait of the city I live in, but it’s much gentler: relatable geographically, but without anything to personally feel bad about. His next, *While We’re Young*, was partially shot in the very Brooklyn neighbourhood I live, and will someday be forced to leave due to gentrification-spurred rent hikes: a process in which I myself am, of course, complicit. Something to contemplate while watching, no matter if unintended and not even registering as conscious subtext: there are, it seems, no end to the unpleasant realities Baumbach will ask me to acknowledge while watching his movies 🍿



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Margot ^{AT} THE Wedding

- ON MARGOT'S PINK SUN HAT -

Maybe if it wasn't pink it wouldn't scream 'Me! Me! Me!' quite so loudly. The hat, of course. The eye-catching number with the wide floppy brim pretty much sums up Nicole Kidman's bitch-queen of a sister, one of the most ferocious creations in the entire Baumbach canon. Margot - for it is she - has pitched up at her chaotic younger sibling's impending nuptials, but her singular headgear tells you that - familial sense of duty notwithstanding - she's very much a woman apart.

This is a hat that proclaims the wearer's innate superiority. It's somehow literary, artistic, grandiloquent. It hints at Manhattan but perhaps really means Paris, Woody Allen but really Eric Rohmer. It suggests adventure and fulfilment, anywhere but here in this slightly dowdy patch on Long Island. It broadcasts the message that, 'Only I, Margot, am worthy of this hat, and the rest of you oiks can pretty much forget about it - just be damn grateful I'm here.'

It speaks volumes, this hat, but then again Margot herself isn't exactly taciturn. She keeps everyone else fully apprised of their inadequacies. Like Jennifer Jason Leigh's scatty Pauline, whose choice of fiancée - kindly, if seemingly unemployable would-be muso Jack Black - she greets with barely concealed scorn. Her pubescent son Claude (Zane Pais, in his only film to date) gets a better deal, but then she treats him more as a sounding board for her inappropriately grown-up musings and preoccupations than an actual person in his own right. A relationship built on self-love as much as maternal affection. How insufferable is this woman? Why are we watching this movie?

Baumbach examined the caustic chemistry of dysfunctional families in his previous breakthrough title *The Squid and the Whale*, and he'd go on to feature square-peg protagonists in both *Greenberg* and *Frances Ha*. *Margot* though, is something else, an infuriating and often bitter comedy of manners, which plays out like a ticking-clock thriller. Will anyone actually throttle this dame on camera? Will Margot ever realise that the relentless, ego-driven bile aimed at everyone else is only isolating her further within her own personal feedback loop of deepening anxiety and escalating passive-aggression? That we're even asking these questions however, presupposes some scintilla of concern about Margot's fate,

perhaps even a declaration on Baumbach's part that extending empathy and understanding towards the ostensibly unloveable is the true heart of compassion.

Kidman, you have to say, refuses any special pleading on Margot's part. She lets us know that behind the seemingly endlessly spiky bravado, there's a seething mess of emotional confusion and some degree of self-recrimination - Margot even storms off the croquet lawn, disgusted at the even more competitive edge such games bring out in her - but there's no attempt to soften the edges or make Margot that bit more approachable. Credit to her, since she must have known that by casting her in the role, Baumbach was hinting at some sort of congruence between Margot's particular pathology and Kidman's regular screen persona - not exactly warm, slightly too princessy, never that likeable.

All of which makes this something of an awkward customer in the Baumbach filmography, not least since the subplot involving the possibly sinister neighbours (presumably intended to suggest that we're all capable of being as judgemental as Margot) feels like it's in another movie entirely. Yet *Margot* demonstrates a key element of what makes Baumbach a truly great filmmaker - his knowledge of people operates on the same level of micro detail as any great novelist you'd care to mention. We all know a Margot. I can confidently proclaim this because in our family, there's a certain someone who is so totally, aggravatingly, uncannily Margot, it's as if Baumbach has been spying on us. The bottomless well of negativity, the ability to put herself at the centre of every domestic mini crisis, the way her entire sensibility seems to be rooted in a parallel universe of her own devising, the utterly shameless self-absorption. It's so damn Margot.

And Baumbach puts it on screen neat, undiluted. It's a film where character is plot, rather than the other way around, and it places him in that class of wise celluloid souls - a top-of-the-head list includes Renoir, Ozu, Naruse, Leigh, possibly even Sirk - who affirm that the washes and eddies of everyday family conflicts and dilemmas are a world of drama and insight in and of themselves. *Margot at the Wedding* doesn't ever play nice, it's just too acerbic and restless for that, but it lays down a sort of root-level truth that stays with you and brings you back for viewing after viewing 🍷



Greenberg

- ON THE GIFT OF A HAMBURGER -


Roger Greenberg, as played by Ben Stiller, is an embodiment of the middle aged pseudo-hipster with unkempt hair and, often, a Steve Winwood shirt. He is an odd man. “Unlikeable” is the easiest way to dismiss him and, if one is so inclined, the film as a whole. The plot is a blank slate upon which complex relationship dynamics may be writ: lodging at his well-to-do brother’s Los Angeles house for six weeks while the family is on vacation, Greenberg succumbs to aimlessness having been recently released from a mental hospital. He soon meets Florence Marr (Greta Gerwig), the twentysomething personal assistant to his brother’s family, who becomes Greenberg’s romantic fling, emotional punching bag and source of wisdom. Throughout the film, Greenberg’s anger manifests itself in mannerisms: letters of complaint, stilted speech patterns. It bubbles to the surface at the prospect of seeing Florence in a less-than-ideal light.

Sensitive and slightly awkward, Florence recognises Greenberg’s real personality, the one that’s hidden under a veneer of abrasiveness. “He seems vulnerable,” she tells a friend after her first hook-up with him. From hiccupping after a sip of beer to apologising for her “ugly bra”, Florence projects a tentative quality – she sees Greenberg’s vulnerability because she too is vulnerable. Florence had no intention to seduce, and wasn’t expecting anyone else to see the bra, but she likes him enough to feel self-conscious about not looking more outwardly sexy. Before they kiss, Greenberg applies lip balm. Florence has a bad habit of picking at her lip: their nervous tics complement one another. A superficially odd couple, to be sure, but from the beginning there’s some connection there, and Baumbach reveals it through the details.

The overall aesthetic of *Greenberg* is intentionally at odds with its protagonist’s sensibility. The palette has a pleasingly sunny, burnished quality, reminiscent of American films and photography of the ’70s. An obvious joke, as Greenberg isn’t a sunny kinda guy. But at the same time, the film possesses a certain warmth. One of the most surprising things is the way it turns the tragic convention of the sick animal on its head. The Greenberg family dog, Mahler, becomes ill, and as the only person in the house, Greenberg must take care of him. Mahler’s malady is used not as a ploy to elicit audience sympathy, but rather as a way for Greenberg and Florence to test their strange, amorphous relationship. As their feelings

toward one another ebb and flow, their interactions around the animal shift between sweetness and discomfort. At the veterinarian’s office, Florence removes the shirt she had over her sundress: “You’re supposed to leave them something that smells like you.” The camera focuses on her décolletage briefly as she leans over the animal. It’s not a moment of objectification, but rather realisation. The cut to Greenberg’s face shows his admiration. We can practically hear his thoughts: I want her; I’ve fucked up.

He’s chastened. Earlier, Greenberg has an ugly outburst. At Florence’s apartment, after a dinner out with his old friend Ivan, the two talk, and Florence says, “You could stay over, wink wink” – an endearingly self-conscious line delivery if ever there was one. Greenberg talks about how he and Ivan jokingly call each other “man” – “it’s our imitation of other people” – and, with excitement, Florence shares a story of going to a bar with a girlfriend, and jokingly acting like party girls to seduce a pair of frat guys. Greenberg reacts with contempt, calling it the stupidest story he ever heard, and storming out. It’s a painful scene, especially given the vulnerability expressed in Florence’s “wink wink.” He’s built up a certain image of her, and this story casts light on a part of her he hasn’t considered. Witnessing it makes him angry, and the quirkiness of awkward mannerisms gives way to something darker and more uncomfortable.

Later in the film, Florence has an abortion – she’s been pregnant the whole time, by her ex. Like Mahler’s illness, this is an element of the story where Baumbach focuses on small gestures instead of dramatic exposition. “I thought since she couldn’t eat, she might be hungry when it’s over,” Greenberg tells Ivan. He brings her a burger to the hospital, offering it for when she’s ready. The burger functions as a sort of apology, and having recognised Greenberg’s vulnerability earlier, it’s likely that Florence sees the value of this gesture. She may not eat the burger right away, but she knows he thought of her. There’s no question that he’s acted rashly on several occasions, but this gesture shows his underlying sensitivity. It’s a moment reminiscent of Raymond Carver’s line, “food is a small, good thing in a time like this,” and it shows that, despite his abrasiveness, Greenberg does care for Florence. He wants to be there for her, in some way, but he doesn’t quite know how. And really, this isn’t a fault so much as a part of the necessarily confusing world of human relationships. 



Frances Ha

- ON THE DANCE CHOREOGRAPHY -

The dictum “write what you know” is a double-edged sword, made even more dangerous because it’s so deceptively tenable. The sheer volume of middling movies about writers or actors fumbling through their twenties has reached a point beyond parody, which is why *Frances Ha*, in large part based on mumblecore regular Greta Gerwig’s own experiences, was such a welcome surprise. Aside from the photography and incisive portrayal of female friendship, dance – both in terms of how it is worked into the narrative and the performances themselves – has made the film distinctive and timeless, something more than an accurate snapshot of life in 2012.

Frances (Gerwig) approaches dance with a seriousness that’s absent from every other aspect of her life, repeatedly rearranging her finances and location in order to pursue her dream of becoming a famous modern dancer. Like most things, Frances shares this fantasy with her best friend Mickey, who will become an “awesomely bitchy publishing mogul” and publish a coffee table book about her – another primarily Manhattan-based profession predicated on chance, skill, and the ability to wait years for the right opportunity. Yet it’s no coincidence that Frances and Mickey discuss their imagined futures together while sitting in bed, an L-cut carrying their droll elaborations over a shot of them sleeping next to each other; this dream remains a dream.

What prevents Frances from achieving that ideal is in part skill, which is made apparent the first time she’s seen in rehearsals with her company. As an apprentice dancer, she’s not given a partner, and so must fill the time and space of being picked up and spun with an ad-libbed motion, her eyes always following Rachel (Grace Gummer), the dancer in front of her who gets to go through the full motions. Baumbach frames the action so that Frances always remains slightly off-centre, emphasising the fact that she’s separate. Her company’s artistic director then immediately orders all understudies to leave the room, driving home Frances’ secondary status.

This framing is echoed later in the film during the company’s actual performance, where all the other dancers clear the stage and Rachel has a lengthy solo. Frances is shown in profile, standing perfectly still in the wings as Rachel’s twirling movements obscure her body. But with a cut, we see her standing alone, her blank expression wavering between

professionalism and thinly veiled dejection. It’s a simple moment that’s among the most powerful in the film, made all the more remarkable because all of the dances were shot in a single day and that the choreographer, Max Stone, was not given any instructions about what types of movements to include beforehand (and had no idea what the story was about, save that the lead was an apprentice in a professional company).

Perfection is usually the lynchpin of movies about dancers: the lead inherently possesses it (*The Red Shoes*), is uncultivated but basically already there (*Flashdance*) or is pathologically pursuing it (*Black Swan*). Frances, on the other hand, doesn’t resolve all of her flaws, and one gets the sense that she never will. *Frances Ha*’s rejection of a traditional ballet obsession with the “perfect” is apparent in Gerwig herself, a lifelong dancer who had studied dance at Barnard but altered her movements to come across as less skilled, and whose physique is healthy rather than slim or skeletal. Frances’ final *coup de grace* – a performance of her own choreography – feels vastly different from the previous two performances, in part because a different choreographer, Travis Waldschmidt, set it. The movements are simpler and less fluid, more concerned with exploring space with hopping, marching, and twisting on the floor. While the previous dances wordlessly reflect Frances’ story – stumbling, falling and changing abruptly – the way in which Frances’ choreography is edited emphasises movements where the dancers touch and react to one another. Frances’ love of playfighting is echoed in a moment where two of the dancers run across the stage and push against each other.

Gerwig and Baumbach’s decision to ground *Frances Ha* in the world of contemporary dance set the stage for such spontaneous interplay between movement and story, but the decision to keep the creation of the choreography separate insured that its incorporation into the finished product wouldn’t merely exist in service of story. Unlike an autobiographical story written by the protagonist or a big musical number that could similarly express feelings, the dances become an extension of the film’s documentary feel. All aspects of Gerwig’s physicality – her warm smiles, her *Mauvais Sang*-inspired sprint to ‘Modern Love,’ her on-demand tap dancing – serve as the charming, messy, impromptu glue 🍷



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The Strange Affair of Robert Siodmak

A celebration of German émigré director Robert Siodmak presents both great strengths and nagging weaknesses.

Robert Siodmak was an uneven director. This unevenness is the case against him, though it also might be as the case for him – he could manage to put across a set-piece that was so good that it would tower over the movie around it.

A fine example is the opening of 1945's *The Spiral Staircase*, one of the films made during the émigré Siodmak's tenure in Hollywood, which lasted from 1939 to 1952. A tracking shot on the street establishes the scene as a small American town sometime in the years before the World War One. In a room adjacent to the lobby of the local hotel, an exhibition of 'Motion Pictures – the wonder of the age' is being advertised. (The film playing inside is billed as *The Kiss*, but is actually DW Griffith's 1912 film *The Sands of Dee*.) As the hand-cranked projector clatters and a stout woman dutifully pounds out piano accompaniment, our attention is drawn to a young woman (Dorothy McGuire) watching a romantic scene with rapt attention. On the floor above the screening, a blonde girl in petticoats limps across her room to fetch a dress from her closet.

As she turns away from the closet, the single eye of a concealed peeper can be seen behind her clothes. The camera presses closer and closer into the dark of his pupil, until the girl's reflection becomes visible. As she raises her arms above her head to pull on the dress, they begin to claw the air – she's been struck a fatal blow! (About 50 years later, Dario Argento would play a variation on this in his film *Tenebrae*.) Back in the screening downstairs, the audience's movie comes to a tragic climax just as the body is discovered in ours, and the first dialogue is spoken. Here, in a little under four minutes, Siodmak distills all of his psychological themes (scopophilia, small-town repression, the proximity of sex and violence to

the impotent voyeur) and laid out his visual motifs (the mirror, the obfuscating subjective view). What can he do for an encore?

The same might've been said after *People on Sunday*, Siodmak's 1930 directorial debut, and one of the most auspicious in cinema – though he shared the credit for it. (It will be playing, along with *The Spiral Staircase*, as part of the BFI's 22 film, two-month season of Siodmak's films – including full re-release honours for 1948's *Cry of the City*.) Robert Siodmak, born on the *fin-de-siècle* in either Leipzig, Dresden, or Memphis, Tennessee – depending on which source you believe – had moved from Dresden to Berlin to break into the movie business with his brother Kurt, two years his junior, in 1925. They fell in with a group of young men on the fringes of the movie industry who convened at Romanisches Café. When these young men decided to pool their talent and resources to make a movie of their own, the Siodmasks got their grubstake from cousin Seymour Nebenzal, a producer at his father Heinrich's Nero-Films, and got cracking.

The loose collective who called themselves 'Filmstudio 29' couldn't compete with the state-of-the-art Neubabelsberg facilities of Universum Film AG (UFA), so they made Berlin itself their set. Their movie would be half-fiction, half-documentary, playful and anecdotal – a candid look at the city at leisure concentrating on a double-date to the beach in Nikolassee. Five young Berliners were cast to play 'characters' whose day jobs (cab driver, record store clerk) were the same as their own. None of the amateur performers would go on to film careers of renown, but the behind-the-scene talent included some people you've probably heard of: Samuel "Billie" Wilder, producer Edgar G Ulmer and cameramen Alfred "Fred" Zinnemann and Eugen Schüfftan,

who had created visual effects for Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. The Siodmasks are co-credited as directors, but because *People on Sunday* was a critical success, many fathers would take credit for it through the years. Whether attributable to a single genius or an eruption of the zeitgeist, it's a startlingly modern film, giving a *flâneur's* sense of the city as crackling with erotic possibility (and disappointment); painful to watch precisely because it is so modern, and makes a soon-to-vanish Berlin seem so proximate.

The Siodmasks, like their Filmstudio 29 collaborators, were Jews, which meant that they would be forced to conduct their careers through the '30s as a rear-guard action. Siodmak moved from Berlin to Paris, leaving worthy films (1930's *Abschied*, 1939's *Pièges*) in his wake. On 31 August, 1939, he boarded the transatlantic steamship Champlain to visit his brother, who'd moved from England to California, changed his name to "Curt," and begun to make his living as a screenwriter. When the ship was just out to sea, Germany declared war on Poland, and the vacation became indefinite.

Preston Sturges was seemingly the only person who'd heard of Robert Siodmak in Los Angeles, but Sturges was a golden boy just then, and Siodmak was soon back to work. He secured a contract with Universal, for whom he made 1943's *Son of Dracula* (from a Curt script) with a less-then-debonair Lon Chaney Jr as the mysterious Count Alucard (spell it backwards), and 1944's *Cobra Woman*, a ga-ga piece of Technicolor exoticism with Maria Montez in a double role, later an unlikely inspiration for Underground/avant-garde filmmakers Kenneth Anger and Jack Smith. Siodmak distinguished these properties with accents of pure style, like the scene in *Son of Dracula* where a plantation owner's daughter steals through the moonlit



bayou to watch her undead lover rise from the swamp, across which he seems to float towards her via a moving sidewalk effect, like that which Jean Cocteau used in *La Belle et la Bête* a few years later.

Soon Siodmak was deemed ready to handle more prestigious properties like 1944's *Christmas Holiday*, an adaption of a Somerset Maugham novel by Herman J Mankiewicz, and a vehicle for Deanna Durbin and Gene Kelly in (mostly) non-singing, non-dancing roles. Kelly plays Robert Manette, the irresponsible scion of a once-mighty New Orleans family who, squirming under the burden of the family name and his mother's expectations, gets wrapped up in murder. "A psychiatrist said that Robert's relationship to his mother was pathological," recalls Durbin, who plays his still-doting wife, outlining a theme which begins to appear in Siodmak's work from this period: the pathology of the family unit, be it smalltown gentry (*The Spiral Staircase*), New York Italians (*Cry of the City*), or South Seas royalty (*Cobra Woman*). It's unknown if Siodmak returned to this theme because his assignments began to follow a particular pattern after the success of *Christmas Holiday*, or because the subject was one he was himself drawn to – on one hand he and Curt had broken definitely with their wealthy father to pursue their artistic ambitions, though on the other he remained happily married to the same woman for 40 years, and outlived her by less than seven weeks.

Siodmak's third film released in 1944, *The Phantom Lady*, doesn't believe in connubial bliss. A man (Alan Curtis) trying to forget his crummy home life with double-scotches and a random pick-up is jailed after his no-account wife is strangled with one of his neckties, leaving only his secretary (Ella Raines) to clear

his name. Highlighted by a feverish scene in which an undercover Raines gets herself taken to an after-hours jam by Elisha Cook Jr's jazz drummer, *The Phantom Lady* was Siodmak's first film with the actress, a brunette of perfect pulchritude discovered by Howard Hawks who would become something like the Joan Bennett to Siodmak's Fritz Lang. They worked together four times, last on 1947's *Time Out of Mind* – characteristically, a story of family ties that bind until they cut off all circulation. In Edwardian London-set *The Suspect* (1945), Raines is the winsome secretary who inadvertently inspires her boss (Charles Laughton, at his most gruesomely pitiable) to hurry his dreadful, shrewish wife down their stairwell and into her grave.

In *The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry*, released the same year, Raines again provides the only gasp of fresh air in an asphyxiating domestic arrangement. George Sanders, playing against type as a shy nebbish, is the last male heir of the formerly-prominent Quincy family, and Raines' new-in-town career woman sets her sights on marrying him despite the machinations of his Munchausen syndrome-suffering sister (Geraldine Fitzgerald), who uses her brother's care for her as a rein – the women's first teatime meeting, punctiliously polite and radiant with contempt, is a stand-out. The film dredges so deep into homicidal familial resentment that you wonder how it will ever pull back, and it only manages to do so through cheating, though the it-was-only-a-dream cop-out fails to put the acrimony that's already been uncorked back in the bottle.

Siodmak's thrillers, visually linked to the German expressionist tradition, have been connected to the vaguely-defined postwar film noir, though only one of the Raines films

is set in contemporary times, and they share an unusual interest in both feminine neurosis and feminine resilience – *Phantom Lady* and *Uncle Harry* were, incidentally, the first two films produced by Joan Harrison, a former Hitchcock scriptwriter and Universal's first female executive. The noir label fits better on Hemingway-adaptation *The Killers* (1946), which introduced Siodmak to another key collaborator, soon known by moviegoers the world over: it's Burt Lancaster's first film. The basic narrative elements – "Boit" plays a sweet lummo who can't get over a girl who's not worth it, and lets her talk him into a caper that don't work out – reappear in Siodmak and Lancaster's second collaboration, the stark and elegant *Criss Cross* (1949). For once in a Siodmak film, the overprotective mother is absolutely right.

By the time Siodmak began filming 1952's *The Crimson Pirate* in Teddington Studios, Lancaster had become a superstar, and the power balance in the collaboration had tilted decisively in his favour. The movie is more a showcase for the boisterous acrobatics of Lancaster and his old partner Nick Cravat than for Siodmak's own dexterity, and the production prompted the director to break with Hollywood for good. Siodmak unloaded his Beverly Hills address on James Mason, returned to Europe, and worked there for the remainder of his life. Though he'd never felt at home in America, he'd done his best work there, movies showed how killing the familiar comforts could be. "There's no place like home," they seem to say, "Thank God." 🍷

The Robert Siodmak season plays at BFI Southbank April – May, 2015. Cry of the City is re-released in UK cinemas on 17 April.

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Mommy

Directed by **AVIER DOLAN**

Starring **ANNE DORVAL, ANTOINE-OLIVIER PILON, SUZANNE CLÉMENT**

Released **20 MARCH**



Xavier Dolan's *Mommy* is not a dystopian film, but the one small tweak it makes to the present looms large, swinging in and out of focus like the Sword of Damocles hung with too much slack. The film begins with a series of title cards that introduce viewers to an alternate Canada in which a controversial new law has empowered parents to permanently forfeit custody of minors, institutionalising problem children who've become too difficult to raise. However cowardly and inhumane such a law might seem, Steve (Antoine-Olivier Pilon) is the feral kind of youth who makes it sound like a good idea. Performed with the unchecked abandon previously reserved for Lars von Trier heroines, Steve is a mother's worst nightmare – not because he's such a terror, but because his destructive mania (insufficiently written off as ADHD) so obviously forms a protective shell around a tender heart, racing with wayward love. For a parent of someone like that, it's the hope that hurts the most.

The legislation introduced at the top of Dolan's unforgettable new film – as bluntly stated as it is quickly tucked away – may seem like a lazy and underdeveloped screenwriting crutch, but that small bit of world-building lurks in every shadow of this 139-minute gauntlet, challenging Steve's mother to give up. The suspense that the title cards instill for the audience, who know that Die (Dolan mainstay Anne Dorval) will eventually surrender her son, is no match for that which burdens the woman herself, who is forced to consider that she could.

Die, of course, is no angel – her name is short for Diane, but she insists on keeping the "e" in there, lest anyone dare think this working class single mother is easily pitied or preyed upon. Brash and unfiltered, Die is the kind of woman who opens her mouth even wider when you catch her chewing gum, and though it would be an understatement to say that her relationship with Steve is messy and prone to wild fluctuations, one thing is immediately clear from the moment she retrieves her son from a juvenile detention center at the start of the film: Steve wasn't

adopted. They share a rather large house on an unremarkable block in suburban Quebec, their shrill personalities ballooning to fill the empty space left by the death of Steve's father three years prior. As Steve careens from one tantrum to the next, desperately trying to be all of the men who Die might be missing from her life, their home hardens into a live grenade, and the only person capable of holding down the pin is Steve and Die's shy, stuttering new neighbour, Kyla (Suzanne Clément, another Dolan regular). The three of them are able to alchemize some kind of tenuous stability, but it can't last.

Answering for his much-discussed decision to shoot the film in a 1:1 aspect ratio (a perfect square resembling an Instagram photo), Dolan has said that the claustrophobic frame was intended to keep his ornamentalism in check – some have accused his past work of being flamboyant to a fault, and a criticism *Mommy* resists by restoring a Dreyer-like attention to the faces of his actors. But for an aesthete like Dolan, every stylistic obstruction registers its negative dimension, and what's omitted from the picture lands with the same impact as that which remains. The aspect ratio isn't ascetic, it's just a different shade of flamboyance, and Dolan does such magically simple things with it. *Mommy* is so affecting in part because Dolan's style has finally struck up a perfectly fluent dialogue with his characters, the saturated richness of his melodrama blossoming into a rare emotional purity – his characters have always been candid, but here they feel genuinely raw.

This sublime harmony between substance in style is underscored by the film's soundtrack, which is stunted sometime around the late '90s. Preemptively taking a page from *Guardians of the Galaxy*, Steve is hung up on a mix CD that his father had made before his death, and so the soundtrack is dominated throwbacks like Oasis, Counting Crows, and even Eiffel 65. The "gimmick", like any part of a Dolan film that's often described as such, returns our attention to the root power of his world: kitsch without irony is love. And love is something that Dolan gets so right that it shines through everything else.

Cultural anachronisms are inherently funny, and it's natural to laugh with recognition at the first chords of Dido's 'White Flag.' But Dolan pushes through that, forcing viewers to hear the music from both sides, simultaneously appreciating it for both its humor and its honesty. And it's the same way with his characters. "A mother doesn't just wake up one day not loving her son," Die tells Steve towards the end of the film, the promise of her words made all the more devastating by the confluence between how true they are, and how dislocated they feel from the time when they might have made a difference.

It goes without saying that Dolan is the only person who could make this film, but much of its lightning-in-a-bottle results from how he made it perfect time, the cinema's most talented wunderkind since Orson Welles straddling the divide between precocious adolescent and fully grown up auteur. Broadly speaking, it may be true that Steve is a manifestation of Dolan's wild excitability, Die his nascent responsibility and Kyla the superego trying to hold everything together, but what matters is that Dolan is able to empathise with them all. He inspires his actors to rampage through the movie with intimate brilliance, and he shapes their material with the wisdom of someone who's acutely aware of his ongoing maturation, and the mutability it entails. Yes, Dolan is perversely accomplished for someone so young, but with *Mommy*, it feels like he's just the right age.

DAVID EHRLICH

ANTICIPATION. *Every new Xavier Dolan film is another opportunity to resent him for being so young.*

4

ENJOYMENT. *Arguably the best mother-son film since Psycho.*

5

IN RETROSPECT. *This is easily Dolan's best film, and it's exciting to think how many times we might have to revise that statement over the years to come.*

5





Xavier Dolan

Mommy is Xavier Dolan's fifth feature film and is released in the UK on his 26th birthday. *LW Lies* spoke to this sleep-deprived Canadian auteur about rage.

LW Lies: There's a lot of love in your characters but also a lot of viciousness. How have you come to such an aggressive vision of love?

Dolan: I've almost never experienced love as something that was really calm and tender and peaceful and beautiful. It's always been intense and emotional and aggressive, maybe even abusive. It's always been these impossible stories of unrequited feelings and chasing people for years and I'm only 25 so my conception of love is very dramatical. I think that sort of love is also very cinematic. We could sit in front of people calmly — and I don't want to say boringly because that would be contemptuous — loving each other without any form of problematic for two hours but what would be the movie? That's part of the answer but I don't know. I've never asked myself the question.

That's a good answer especially as you're jet-lagged.

I am, completely, and I didn't get to sleep. Normally I always sleep. It didn't work this time. I had all my sleeping pills. It didn't work. Not one minute.

So are you in survival mode now?

Sort of and I'm very worried about the answers that I'm devising. English is not my first language so whenever I'm tired it's the worst because I can't find the cool words that I'd be using in French. Or not cool but the right words and I'm always afraid that people will get it wrong.

Maybe you won't sound as cool as you would like but you'll be more raw so that could be cool in a different way.

I'm always rather raw. It's been a problem. People have misinterpreted that rawness in the past. I'm rather honest. I don't bullshit in

interviews and in public. I've never really been into performing. I was always myself and I guess myself is something that can irritate people or irk them.

Would you say you identify more with Steve or with Diane?

That's a tough one. I've written both characters so of course I identify with them. Well, I understand Steve's rage and violence. I have that violence in me and I have that rage in me so I understand that. But he's also mentally ill. I don't think I'm mentally ill so that is where my identification stops. I would tend to say that I relate more to Diane, yet she's a mum, she's 45. We have very few things in common but then we have everything in common. I just feel for her. I understand. I just, I do.

Have you identified the targets or the cause of your rage?

No. If I had I wouldn't be talking about it. I guess I'm talking about it because I'm looking for answers. I think I have those answers but they're too easy and not satisfying so I keep digging. I had that violence in me when I was, like, five. I would fight in the schoolyard during recess and beat the shit out of other kids for no reason at all.

So you were a little terror?

I was awful. It makes me extremely uncomfortable to think about it.

Does making films diminish your rage?

Of course. I think we can all say, empirically speaking, that ways of expressing yourself have always channelled violence or inner problems. So that's not a cliché. It's true. No, I'm lucky and privileged to have found that luxurious hobby and passion that cinema is because that's how I got to

evacuate my own violence while Steve doesn't have anything to evacuate his.

You were already saying you were a screenwriter at the age of 15.

I started writing scripts when I was 11, 12, 13, maybe.

Do you have plans for those scripts?

They are all on floppy disc so I'd have to bring them to the specialty store and have them transferred onto USB or DVD. I don't know that there would be anything suitable for actual consideration but it could be funny. I remember what might be on those discs: superhero films. Back then there had only been one *X-Men* movie and I think my films had a mix of mutants and guardian angels that were inserted into society to protect people.

You're 25, you've made five feature films. Do you imagine you're always going to be so prolific?

I imagine I'm always going to be that prolific but will the response always be like that? Will I always have the privilege of showcasing my work in international festivals? Will I always have the mediatic attention and scrutiny in a positive way? That seems rather unfathomable. And that's something I'm thinking about. I'm thinking, 'Wow, the response to *Mommy* has been great and it's been so satisfying and rewarding and it's made us so happy,' but I can't afford to think that it's going to be like that for every movie. I know that *Mommy* has touched people but I can't tell that story over and over again. I've done it now so I feel like they're going to be disappointed with the next one because it's not going to be as emotionally engaging



Jauja

Directed by LISANDRO ALONSO

Starring VIGGO MORTENSEN, DIEGO ROMAN, VIILBJØRK MALLING AGGER

Released 10 APRIL



A man ambles across a largely barren landscape in search of some unknown destiny. This short description of Lisandro Alonso's latest feature, *Jauja*, would also fill in for every one of his previous four, spanning from 2001's *La Libertad* through to 2008's *Liverpool*, suggesting an artist who is uniquely attracted to lone, primal struggles against the sublime indifference of the natural world. These intimate, inchoate journeys translate as cosmic allegories for the variety and mystery of human existence. They often tap anthropological depths, less celebrations of coarse manhood and more examinations of what it means to be a man.

A teenage girl (Viilbjørk Malling Agger) asks that her father, Captain Dinesen (Viggo Mortensen), buy her a puppy, one that will follow her wherever she goes. He says he'll consider it when they return to their native Denmark, as they're currently waylaid on an tortuous expedition in Southern Argentina. Though Alonso rigs the narrative so interpretation remains fluid throughout, one could read *Jauja* as a simple philosophical expression of a dog blindly following the girl, Ingeborg, as she flees with a secret lover into the wilds of Patagonia. This film

is a reimagining of 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland' where the white rabbit leads the way to a dread wasteland of tinpot cannibal overlords, fetid bogs, dream caves and terrains whose formulation and topography appear to openly mock those who attempt to conquer them.

Call it calculated caution, but the beauty of this film comes from its patent refusal to say what it is and what it's about, resulting in a perpetual sense of renewed intrigue and a constant hunger for the fragments of story to neatly interlock. In a world divested of conventional meaning, banal objects such as a toy soldier or a mangy mutt somehow become vital totems of significance even though it's never certain how or why. The film is shot by Aki Kaurismäki's regular cinematographer Timo Salminen in boxy 1:33 aspect ratio with the corners of the frame curved to suggest early photography tests redolent of the story's 19th century setting. There are two or three shots in which the camera moves, but Dinesen's trek is captured mostly through static, fastidiously composed tableaux in which he trudges from one edge of the frame to the other and via a variety of obscure angles and vantages.

Though there are vague suggestions that Dinesen may have died, may be dreaming or is possibly even the embodiment of someone else's dream, *Jauja* is a film that recognises that all of the above possibilities constitute the essence of what cinema is. A composition, the placing of a camera or the depth of the focus can suddenly transform a gorgeous vista into a remote nightmare. A genius performance by Mortensen sees him not only fully commit to the logic and manners of a "real" time and place in history, but there retains an omnipresent glimmer – like a shimmering star in the night sky – that he's also fully aware of this fanciful and eccentric trial by cinema. **DAVID JENKINS**

ANTICIPATION. *Minimalist maverick Lisandro Alonso buddies up with a big Hollywood movie star.*

4

ENJOYMENT. *Miraculous. Blithely does its own thing, but with staggering assurance and artistry.*

5

IN RETROSPECT. *Book a spot on those 2015 best-of lists now.*

5



Life of Riley

Directed by ALAIN RESNAIS

Starring SABINE AZÉMA, SANDRINE KIBERLAIN, ANDRÉ DUSSOLIER

Released 6 MARCH

Statues Also Die, and so do icons: the death of Alain Resnais in March of 2014 at the jolly old age of 92 was akin to a giant toppling after seven decades (or so) of steady dominion. Where the director of *Night and Fog*, *Last Year at Marienbad* and *Mon Oncle* *Amerique* ranks in the global-historical canon is a question for the list makers (who better not get it wrong), but for several generations of cinephiles, the Brittany-born filmmaker was always a beacon of inventive, idiosyncratic artistry. Having done his part in the '50s and '60s to help rewrite the style book of cinematic language – *Muriel*, *Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour* – he proved content to spend his final years scribbling colourfully in its margins.

Like Robert Altman's similarly valedictory *A Prairie Home Companion*, *Life of Riley* is a highly theatrical work: it was based on a play by frequent Resnais collaborator Alan Ayckbourn, and its characters are amateur actors mounting a revival of the British playwright's previous hit *Relatively Speaking*. This self-reflexivity provides a foundation for Resnais to indulge in as much moviemaking gamesmanship as possible: he places the action on colourful

sets backed by freshly painted flats, so that the scenes of the actors running lines are visually indistinguishable from their "real life" interactions – which are themselves torqued in the direction of farce. The plot pivots on the company's decision to replace a departed cast member with their mutual friend George Riley, who as the film begins is in the late stages of a terminal illness; inviting this seemingly significant figure to join the play catalyses all kinds of old rivalries and desires, around which Resnais manoeuvres his camera with evident and never-proscenium bound vigour.

A film comprised almost entirely out of telling disparities, *Life of Riley* features a title character who never appears on screen and veteran actors playing the roles of younger people (both in Ayckbourn's play and in the play-within the play): as married women each in love with the unseen Mr Riley, Sabine Azema and Sandrine Kiberlain are separated by at least 20 years but give equally tricky, fetching performances. The rampant stylisation (which extends to cameo appearances by a robotic rodent, a delightful non-sequitur presence) does not obscure the plays' themes of ageing, loss and

regret, but rather places them in poignant counterpoint: the joy of art is that it provides the illusion of a freshly inhabited world, even when the people who created it have long since slipped away. It's facetious to assume that Resnais intended *Life of Riley* as any kind of capstone on his career, and therein lies its undeniable appeal as a farewell gesture – he never stopped enjoying a medium he'd long since mastered, and so was destined to go out on his own terms, no matter what. Exeunt, pursued by woodchuck. ADAM NAYMAN

ANTICIPATION. *The dippy, primary-hued swansong based on an Alan Ayckbourn play is from one of cinema's grand masters.*

4

ENJOYMENT. *A drama within a drama within a drama that's orchestrated with lightness, subtlety and enchantment.*

4

IN RETROSPECT. *With his unimpeachable modernist canon, Resnais has left big boots to fill.*

4



Hyena

Directed by GERARD JOHNSON

Starring PETER FERDINANDO, NEIL MASKELL, STEPHEN GRAHAM

Released 6 MARCH

If repeated real-life scandals have left the public mistrustful of the British police constabulary, then our TV and film industries have only exacerbated matters further. Depictions of the force have ranged from bumbling plods to maverick wrong'uns fuelled by booze and plagued by a maelstrom of emotional issues.

Gerard Johnson's second feature as writer-director (after 2009's moderately successful serial killer thriller, *Tony*) introduces us to a gang of coppers, bent double by their own corruption. And a gang is exactly what they are, with all of the intimidating implications. In more than just its beastly title, *Hyena* resembles David Michôd's precision-executed *Animal Kingdom*, which captured a criminal family in violent freefall. This time it's the police themselves who are going daahn.

The chameleon-like character actor Peter Ferdinando (the cousin of Johnson, recently seen in *Starred Up* and *A Field in England*) plays Michael Logan, the boss of a West London narcotics task-force which includes Neil Maskell's Martin. They're coke-hoovering, bully boy reprobates who've turned authority into personal advantage and are in league with the ethnic criminals they purport to despise. Another fantastically

versatile actor, Richard Dormer, plays the weasily anti-corruption officer who's on to them, while Stephen Graham pops up part way through as a senior officer with whom Michael shares a troubled past.

Hyena sees the gang switch allegiance from Turkish drug smugglers to a pair of Albanian gangster brothers, the Kabashis (Orli Shuka and Gjevat Kelmendi), who Logan is later tasked to investigate. They're a hulking, terrifying pair described as "a new breed of criminal" and are shown as limb-loppers, sex-traffickers and also – in scenes which chill as much as any of the film's violence – as family men.

A sub-plot involving a trafficked woman, Ariana (Elisa Lasowski, excellent), is handled in a way that's effectively unsettling in sequences which deliver the horrifying impact the subject matter deserves. She's traded in a crowded street for a small bag of cash and is imprisoned and abused in a house on an affluent street. Other aspects are less successful, including a reveal via a recording device that's a little too convenient and, although MyAnna Buring brings a flash of soothing humanity, she's squandered in a small role as Michael's girlfriend.

The film hangs heavily on Ferdinando's

broad shoulders – both literally and figuratively – and this impressive actor stands up to the scrutiny of close focus. For a good while, *Hyena* drives forward with real urgency and palpable menace. However, hackneyed exchanges, clunky exposition and predictable plot developments act as speed bumps breaking its confident charge. It lacks the depth and dialogue to match its visual ferocity and the clout of its cast. Johnson's film starts out racing before developing a bit of a limp; its beautifully captured brutality and hypnotising revelry hint at the masterful film that might have been. EMMA SIMMONDS

ANTICIPATION. *The strong cast make it an intriguing prospect.*

3

ENJOYMENT. *Intoxicating, ferocious, and righteously disturbing but also frustrating, uneven and clichéd.*

3

IN RETROSPECT. *Its visual force suggests Gerard Johnson has a bright future as a director.*

3



Wild Tales

Directed by DAMIÁN SZIFRÓN

Starring LILIANA ACKERMAN, LUIS MANUEL ALTAMIRANO GARCÍA, ALEJANDRO ANGELINI

Released 27 MARCH

With its exaggerated vision of societal tensions reaching boiling point, *Wild Tales* serves as a comically pessimistic barometer of the Argentine national mood, still defined by the nightmares of the economic depression at the turn of the century. In Pedro Almodóvar's *Pepi, Luci, Bom...*, the post-Franco Spanish landscape became a hedonistic wonderland in which artists partied their way through the hangover of fascism. While Szifrón shares Almodóvar's (on production duties here) unique strain of dark humour, his characters' disenchantment manifests itself in a very different way, through the blunt force of violence. Imagine Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* repurposed with an impish, bourgeois-baiting comedy streak.

This is a sharp, tightly directed anthology film comprised of six standalone shorts, linked by a potent brand of rage against the political machine. Szifrón reduces modern Argentinean society to a morass of gross absurdity that provokes its victims to action. Whether it's a yuppie wedding blighted by infidelity or a Kafkaesque world where arbitrary bureaucracy forms its own insurmountable power structure, each strand

makes up a different shade of the same hell in which the characters face an unappealing choice – pay and relax or give yourself a heart attack. *Wild Tales* is about the unspoken third option: resistance. It's the ultimate bourgeois fear – the downtrodden subjects seeing the fragile mortal behind the velvet curtain and deciding to tear the Emerald City to the ground.

While it moves at a fair pace, cantering from one form of elegantly constructed mayhem to the next, *Wild Tales*' satire plays broad, trading in the kind of high impact, low grade aphorisms that form the domain of stand-up comedy routines the world over. The narrative glibness is compensated for by a sleek aesthetic that lends the picture a sense of propulsion and visual wit. Indeed, the film excels in its mischievous sense of irony, always undercutting its calculated excesses with a sly wink. What is truly laudable is that, despite an outlook that veers towards the nihilistic, it is nimble and fleet-footed in its pursuit of societal rot, skillfully avoiding the hysterically overwrought bile of Bobcat Goldthwait's similarly primed *God Bless America*.

Szifrón's self-consciousness proves an

unexpected asset to the film, tempering its more outlandish proclivities by rooting the contrivances firmly within the realm of the fable. The world of *Wild Tales* is palpably our own, but the events within it unfold with the artificially calibrated precision of a parable; even the title itself is an anachronism. The result is a state of the nation address ensconced in reality, but driven by the mythical aura of violence. With one notable exception, each protagonist takes ownership of his situation and becomes the modern incarnation of a folk hero. In this sense, the stories of *Wild Tales* are outlaw ballads for a new Argentina. **CRAIG WILLIAMS**

ANTICIPATION. *A darkly comic portmanteau backed by Almodóvar? Sounds promising.*

3

ENJOYMENT. *Car chases, rat poison and nuptial carnage – the two hours fly by.*

4

IN RETROSPECT. *Broad strokes, dexterously delivered.*

3



The Voices

Directed by **MARJANE SATRAPI**

Starring **RYAN REYNOLDS, GEMMA ARTERTON, JACKI WEAVER**

Released **20 MARCH**

Jerry (Ryan Reynolds) is one troubled soul. Not that you'd know it from his cheesy suburban good manners – a veneer of cheer taken to the next level by the hot pink boiler suit that he wears to work at Milton Fixture & Faucet. His kindly therapist (Jacki Weaver) is happy that he has the social stake of employment, unlike his mother who, by letting go, became the most cacophonous of the personas that haunt her son. His doctor doesn't know that Jerry has stopped taking his pills and is having nightly conversations with his cat, Mr Whiskers and dog, Bosco.

An arrow spins on a colour wheel of humour ranging from the bright-white of hilarity to a dark shade of black. Reynolds voices both his pets. The evil Mr Whiskers has a Scottish accent and his crude disdain ("Did you fuck the bitch?") is at once entertainingly ludicrous and somehow entirely logical coming from an aloof feline. Bosco advocates for good and Jerry relies on him for love in a way that is unhealthy outside of the human-animal democracy of Walt Disney.

Is this making light of mental illness? No. Director Marjane Satrapi and scriptwriter Michael R Perry both have wild idiosyncratic imaginations and their combined individuality

and comic daring have resulted in a paradoxical treasure trove. They have made a film that is both bleak and frothy, a tale of despair told with glee, a melodrama delivered with camp panache, a tragedy that is also a comedy.

Reynolds' performance is attuned to all contradictions. Jerry falls for the "office hottie" Fiona, played with a mix of trashy cruelty and welcome sanity by Gemma Arterton. Jerry's tactics for getting ahead with Fiona are determined by his pets, as they argue with each other for control of his behaviour. There are exchanges and scenes that if described aloud would sound cartoonish. Reynolds renders them touching by his manic, puppy-dog goodwill. He does bad things, lots of them, but is always stricken afterwards. Little-by-little, the world of pathological madness is made charming until it's the most beguiling of hallucinations.

Production design with its vintage flair reflects Jerry's earnest desire to see the good. An unreliable narrator alone gives no perspective on the universe and Satrapi provides illumination in certain shocking moments – Jerry starts taking his meds, kitsch surroundings become grotesque. Reality is

too ugly to be survived so the rollercoaster of insanity is mounted again. Several on-the-nose lines nail down the rails on which this incomparable ride is attached: "That head shrinker doesn't care if you're happy. She just wants you to be obedient." It's true, after a certain behavioural line is crossed, society doesn't care for personal happiness. By playing with storytelling rules, almost to the point of madness, Satrapi has elicited sympathy for the devil. **SOPHIE MONKS KAUFMAN**

ANTICIPATION. *Ryan Reynolds voicing talking animals?*

Could go either way but Satrapi is the business.

3

ENJOYMENT. *Madness in great ones must not unwatched go. And watch out for your cats.*

4

IN RETROSPECT.

The melting down of barriers between sanity and insanity has never felt so intoxicating.

4

Marjane Satrapi

The director who made her name with *Persepolis* returns with a blackly-comic yarn involving Ryan Reynolds and a talking cat.

After making her name internationally with 2007's autobiographical comic book adaptation *Persepolis*, and follow-up *Chicken With Plums* from 2011, Iranian director Marjane Satrapi has embarked in a radical new direction with her first US-set film, *The Voices*. It stars a startling Ryan Reynolds as Jerry Hickfang, a chirpy psychopath whose cat instructs him to kill people.

LWLies: What drew you to this script?

Satrapi: After I'd made *Persepolis* and *Chicken with Plums* people started sending me scripts. First of all I was seen as the specialist with children... but these were boring stories for children. And then because I'm a chick they would send me scripts about women who buy expensive shoes and handbags, but they don't work... and they're not prostitutes. I don't know these chicks! I didn't like any of that. Suddenly I got this script, and I thought, 'Oh my God, this is so fucked up that I have to do it.' I was so full of fear, but being scared is the motor of my life.

Did you always have Ryan Reynolds in mind for the part?

The producers told me that Ryan was really interested. I knew him from *The Proposal* and *The Green Lantern*. I'd not seen *Buried*, which is his best film. I met the guy, I didn't know what to expect, and he kept on telling me 'I'm Jerry.' I said to him, 'Stop saying that!' I kept looking at his face, and he has these creepy eyes, and at the same time, when he smiles – he definitely has a 'thing.' As a director it's very rare for you to become a spectator in your own film – when an actor gives such a great performance that you are no longer directing. I was like, 'Wow, this is so cool.' And it happened many times with Ryan. He's a fucking Ferrari. You can do whatever you want with him. He's really talented.



And he does all these bizarre voices.

In my head, the cat sounded like Joe Pesci, but Ryan comes along and says, 'I want him to be a Scottish man with a thick voice.' Suddenly, like a flash, I remembered a Scottish pub near my house where I would drink lots of whisky, and I remembered this thin Scottish man with red hair who played darts, and of course it had to be...

The supporting cast are great too.

I talk about Ryan because he's the main guy but I have to say that Gemma Arterton – who is the coolest girl in this world – and Anna Kendrick were exactly the same. There was one dick in the cast, but I'm not going to say who that was. I need to have some secrets! He didn't have an important role, so it's okay...

The special effects have a DIY quality to them.

People told me, 'You have to do it with green screen,' but I'm against that. It's boring for me, the cinematographer, and most of all the actors, because they don't know who they're playing against. There are scenes where talking heads are kept in a fridge, so I had the actors actually sitting in the fridge, I added a bit of prosthetic, and the camera is locked. People have forgotten that you can do things simply. You have to make it look real, and to achieve that, you have to do it for real.

It's a dark film, but also a very beautiful one.

I have a great set designer, and it just so happens that we have the same taste. I've always been a painter, so I have a thing with framing, but also with colour and light. I love the design of the 1960s, and for Jerry's character, it couldn't just be lousy factory stuff, in this small town in Michigan; we had to liven things up with some pink.

Going back to the start, do you still think people define you through *Persepolis*?

It's the story of my life, and people who've read it are sure that they know me very well. But I'm more mean than they think!

What's next for you?

When I finish a film, it's like I'm completely empty. I need to walk and to talk to people; read, see films, listen to music to fill myself up, because [to make a film] you have to have something to say. I paint, and when I do, I don't have an asshole producer on my back all day. I'm just with myself. I'm 43, I'm a smoker. I'm very optimistic that I can work, full-steam, for another 30 years. If I'm very speedy, I can make a movie every two years, so that's 15. And then I will die. So I have to do different stuff before I die. I don't want to have any regrets in my life.

The Face of an Angel

Directed by **MICHAEL**

WINTERBOTTOM

Starring **DANIEL BRÜHL, KATE**

BECKINSALE, CARA DELEVINGNE

Released **27 MARCH**



There's a line in Michael Winterbottom's *The Face of an Angel* in which surly, divorced film director Thomas Lang (Daniel Brühl), in search of his next project, talks about how he wants to sweep aside the hatred and violence relating to a real-life murder case he's tapping for narrative inspiration in order to make film about love. Taking heed of those words, we'll refrain from going into too much detail of Michael Winterbottom's fudged and self-consciously arty exploration into the case of Meredith Kercher, the British student murdered while studying in Perugia, Italy in 2007, and focus instead on the affirmative side of matters.

It's admirable that Winterbottom avoids scurrilous conjecture and a lowest-common-denominator whodunit structure, and he's a

director able to coax impressive performances from his actors that are always appealing, naturalistic and unshackled from stereotype. While Brühl and Beckinsale score just above solid, the top trump is model and singer Cara Delevingne. She is, by an embarrassing margin, the most compelling reason to see this film, building a character who exists as the antithesis of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl.

She plays a student and waitress whose disparate friendship group transcends genders and generations, eventually becoming one of Lang's most trusted helpmeets. Unsurprisingly, she appears totally at ease in front of the camera, delivering her lines as if she's inventing them on the spot, and gesticulating in a manner which suggests she's been entirely consumed by her

character. It really is one of the most bracingly brilliant performances by a British actor for long, long time. It is, then, a crying shame that the film surrounding it is something of a dud.

DAVID JENKINS

ANTICIPATION. *Winterbottom is always worth keeping an eye on.*

3

ENJOYMENT. *Dramatically underwhelming. Doesn't really feel like there's a film here.*

2

IN RETROSPECT. *Cara Delevingne – please go forth and conquer.*

2

Dior and I

Directed by **FRÉDÉRIC TCHENG**

Starring **RAF SIMONS, PIETER**

MULIER, FLORENCE CHEHET

Released **27 MARCH**



The name Christian Dior is so enshrined in glamour and history that fashion-watchers will naturally gravitate towards this behind-the-scenes doc. But for the layperson, is there – to paraphrase the famous Linda Evangelista quote – anything to get out of bed for here?

The answer is rooted in the glitzy trail that director Frédéric Tcheng's debut, *Diana Vreeland: The Eye Has to Travel*, spun following its release in 2011. At a VIP screening in Paris, Tcheng met a Dior head honcho. He knew that the fashion house was in the process of replacing outgoing creative director, John Galliano, and that a Belgian chap named Raf Simons was leading the pack of contenders. "He's a minimalist!" thought Tcheng at the time – a proclamation expressed early on in the film. Inviting a minimalist into the house of Dior carried the potential for fiery dust-ups.

Documenting this changing of the guard was going to be Tcheng's film. Fortunately for Simons and unfortunately for Tcheng, give or take a few signs of mild stress, everyone rubs along admirably and the film desperately wants for dramatic intrigue.

The strongest story strand, which documents preparations for Simons' first haute couture collection, is its sly, perhaps inadvertent demystification of auteur theory. What this means is Tcheng and his cameras spend more time with the seamstresses than with anyone else. These woman and men, dressed plainly in white lab coats, have worked at Dior for up to 40 years. They create Simons' visions with skill and no affectations.

It's a sweet inside portrait that counteracts *The Devil Wears Prada*-esque depictions of the fashion world as ultimately psychotic and fueled by ego.

Gentleness extends to the memoirs of the maestro himself. Christian Dior's account of transforming from a naturally private person to a public figure is narrated over archive photography. Passion rather than power – lust defines *Dior and I*. Tcheng makes the most of the airy material, crafting it in a representative spirit.

SOPHIE MONKS KAUFMAN

ANTICIPATION. *Tcheng's debut was full of sass and charm.*

3

ENJOYMENT. *Pleasant but slight.*

3

IN RETROSPECT. *The talented Tcheng has yet to sniff out a universal story.*

3

Spring

Directed by **JUSTIN BENSON,**
AARON MOORHEAD
Starring **LOU TAYLOR PUCCI,**
NADIA HILKER, VANESSA BEDNAR
Released **17 APRIL**



Without giving too much away, there's a very satisfying synchronicity between one of the central characters in Justin Benson and Aaron Moorhead's *Spring* and the fact that the film itself is a shape-shifting beast which feels as if it has to adapt to survive. It's as if the directors have taken on a dare to see how many different movie genres they can namecheck within a feature runtime, and while they carry out this task with a surfeit of verve, it does leave you with a feeling that you don't really know what you've just seen.

Perennial almost man Lou Taylor Pucci plays LA-based loser Evan who decides to flee to Italy. His clean slate is swiftly blotted when he spies mysterious lady-in-red Louise (Nadia Hilker) at a bar in the coastal village of Bari, and while she initially comes on very strong, Evan sees long-

haul potential in this mysterious beauty. The first half of the movie lures you into thinking it's an adorable and droll twentysomething cross-cultural romance set against stunning peach sunsets and imposing baroque architecture. Then the ball drops, lots of fluffy white rabbits die and Evan desperately attempts to retain this idyll despite a series of extenuating circumstances which he finds tough to comprehend.

It's a film whose individual parts are perhaps more impressive than the whole, with innovative drone-cam shots, some special effects work which recalls John Carpenter's *The Thing* (high praise!) and two very committed and empathetic lead performances. Yet *Spring* is eventually undone by its own ahead-of-the-curve ingenuity, the dramatic peak occurring 45 minutes prior

to a prolonged and ponderous finale which opts for expository eccentricity over emotional sincerity. **DAVID JENKINS**

ANTICIPATION. *Some positive word was generated when it played the 2014 London Film Festival.*

3

ENJOYMENT. *This is on the very higher cusp of three, grazing but not quite penetrating a four.*

3

IN RETROSPECT. *Almost, but not quite. Benson and Moorhead's talents are undeniable, however.*

3

Altman

Directed by **RON MANN**
Released **3 APRIL**



How the heck do you condense the life's work of one of America's most prolific auteurs into a neat 90-minute documentary? Just ask director Ron Mann, who provides a rather adept solution in his new film, which offers a welcome refresher of a bona fide cinematic icon almost a decade on from his death. In *Altman*, Mann recruits various long-time admirers and collaborators, asking them to provide their personal definition of the phrase 'Altmanesque.' It's a brilliantly simple approach, with each respondent's interpretation contributing to a sequence of snapshots of this singular director.

The responses range from droll ("Kicking Hollywood's ass," smiles Bruce Willis) to poignant ("Expecting the unexpected," offers a wistful Robin Williams), and each feels as much a reflection of the interviewees' personalities

as Altman's. But this is much more than talking heads driven hagiography. Drawing on a wealth of archive material, Mann goes to great lengths to better understand Altman's creative process while utilising key scenes from some of his better known and most revered works — *MASH*, *Nashville*, *Short Cuts*, *Gosford Park* — to reinforce the general view that he was by turns a maverick and a visionary.

Altman's reputation and artistic sensibilities are well documented, of course, and to that end it is particularly rewarding to learn more about the early stages of his career, in particular his transition from television to film in the '50s and '60s via shows such as *Combat!* and *Whirlybirds*. Most fascinating of all is a segment on Altman's 1980 commercial flop *Popeye*, which Mann makes a convincing case for being a misunderstood musical comedy classic. Although Altman's

genius was by no means absolute, his ability to constantly roll with the punches undoubtedly enabled him to make a lasting impact on his craft. **ADAM WOODWARD**

ANTICIPATION. *If anyone deserves their own feature-length retrospective, it's Robert Altman.*

4

ENJOYMENT. *An economic yet comprehensive portrait of a true master of cinema.*

4

IN RETROSPECT. *Inevitably not as subversive as its subject, but a fitting tribute nonetheless.*

3



John Wick

Directed by **CHAD STAHELSKI, DAVID LEITCH**
 Starring **KEANU REEVES, MICHAEL NYQVIST, ALFIE ALLEN**
 Released **10 APRIL**

Even those who encountered positive notices during *John Wick's* US run can be justified in their skepticism. Notwithstanding how awful Keanu Reeves' track record has been in recent years, the prospect of a hitman-seeking-revenge thriller directed by two stuntmen-cum-directors and written by someone whose only prior credits are tossed-off TV actioners is hardly "bright".

Sometimes, though, the consensus is spot-on. With its cut-to-the-bone visual style and derring-do to introduce an alternate universe (in which various high-concept edges are sanded-down into simple procedures), *John Wick* is probably the closest any action film has come to marrying Bresson and Bioshock. Better yet that it can show a bit of humility, too. Derek Kolstad's script finds this seemingly impossible middle ground by starting with only the most essentially, readily identifiable pieces of character-building: John Wick, in the midst of grieving over his wife's death, is given a new lease on life with the arrival of a beagle bought by the spouse during her dying days. When that cute dog is killed by a pack of Russian toughs, the mysterious man at *John Wick's* centre — "The one you sent to kill the fucking boogeyman,"

according to former comrade Viggo Tarasov (Michael Nyqvist) — begins waging war on his aggressors.

This loss of serenity becomes a fuel for anger in the action-heavy remainder, though each is imbued with the same palpable sense of compositional care. As if they'd determined tightly shot, quickly cut hand-to-hand fight scenes a prime example of what not to do, directors Chad Stahelski and David Leitch stage each of the film's many battles with respect for their performers. It's one thing to build a tense and lengthy life-or-death fight on the question of who can push a knife the hardest, or to have your lead blitz through a music-blaring club while wiping out a small army of aggressors. It's quite another to give these sequences some breathing room — most shots last for several seconds at a time, capturing multiple swift actions in any given frame — and a chance to be built toward, anticipated, and justified. The villains' dialogue isn't a pleasure because it's delivered by remotely compelling characters, but because so much is devoted solely to explaining Wick's terrifying abilities. Genuine laughs are earned once it's clear that death at his hands is more of an inevitability than a defeat.

Better to rely on exposition here than in any explication of its sci-fi world, which confidently sidesteps certain logical gaps — from where do the hitmen's specialised currency and personal hotel come from? — by embedding conceits into the action with quiet confidence. One of the few things *John Wick* shares with films of its ilk is an unfortunate tendency to go on somewhat long, yet it's in service of something rare: an understanding of the character's desire for closure. We could use many more efforts of this stripe.

NICK NEWMAN

ANTICIPATION. *The word has been strong on this one.*

3

ENJOYMENT. *Occasional bagginess is redeemed by the best fight scenes in recent memory.*

4

IN RETROSPECT. *Lingers for days afterward because of the care put into each step of the story and each action set piece.*

4



Blind

Directed by **ESKIL VOGT**

Starring **ELLEN DORRIT PETERSEN, HENRIK RAFAELSEN, VERA VITALI**

Released **27 MARCH**

There's an old adage that says when one sense is impaired, others will naturally strengthen in their place. With this extremely clever and perceptive debut feature, Eskil Vogt proposes that this apocryphal physiological quirk shouldn't be limited to just the senses, but to imagination, intuition and philosophical perspective. For no medically calculable reason, Ingrid (Ellen Dorrit Petersen) one day begins to suffer from blurry vision in one eye. By the time she's in front of a doctor, both eyes are fogged up and she's told that she will soon be blind. Her husband, Morten (Henrik Rafaelsen), is an architect who appears to have naturally adapted to his wife's problems, though she suspects he may be cheating on her. She wouldn't know for certain, having chosen to live out a cloistered existence, flitting around in their bright, airy pad. Yet this situation of being unable to carry out simple daily tasks sets her imagination into overdrive, and she compensates for the dearth of stimulation through alternative means.

If it sounds like a fairly cut-and-dried relationship drama in which a couple's fidelity is tested by the random degradation

of the body, it's not, and props are due to Vogt for shunning melodrama at every possible opportunity. *Blind* is a predominantly affirmative portrayal of the sensorily deprived, more interested in exploring the inner rather than the outer life. Ingrid has to learn to accept that, say, making a cup of tea or heating up a bowl of soup is no longer the reactive process it once was, but she doesn't dwell on those difficulties, instead focusing her attentions on the things she still can do well (and to reveal what those 'things' are would be a major spoiler). The Academy Awards set would likely remain unimpressed with the film, as it posits the radical notion that disability does not automatically result in either great suffering or great fortune – it banally sits somewhere in the middle, and its depiction on screen requires a performance of awkward nuance rather than full-bore, over-learned theatrics.

Things become a little more complex when two other characters enter the fray, a dippy Swede by the name of Elin (Vera Vitali) and a slightly corpulent porn addict named Einar (Marius Kolbenstvedt). Initially, their inclusion in the story seems quite arbitrary

– were Ingrid able to see, you'd suspect that these were the folks she had been watching all day from her apartment window. When fully contextualised, these characters are what confirms that *Blind* is not in any way a social realist document, but something more exhilaratingly metaphysical. It's a film about films, espousing the joys of fiction as a way to transport us into exotic locales, to see other worlds and meet other people without ever having to leave the dinky urban prisons we call apartments. **DAVID JENKINS**

ANTICIPATION. *From the writer of Joachim Trier's Reprise and Oslo, 31 August. And that's a quality CV if we ever saw one.*

3

ENJOYMENT. *Initial patience is rewarded generously with a film which brandishes its intellect with pleasing lightness.*

4

IN RETROSPECT. *Definitely one that repays repeat viewings.*

4



Dreamcatcher

Directed by **KIM LONGINOTTO**

Released **6 MARCH**

The time will arrive when documentary filmmaking is considered a legitimate form of artistic endeavour and not some two-bit funtime annex which is easy because it doesn't require any imagination. Then, the lolly-gagging cultural gatekeepers of the British film industry will dust the canapé scrapings from their flapping dickies and finally recognise the sublime achievements of Kim Longinotto. Here is a director who, for over 30 years, has remained doggedly focused on the topic of modern feminism, its cultural variants and the callous strategies undertaken by (usually) male oppressors to undercut the status of women as equals. Her films don't make money, they don't produce spin-offs, they don't snag industry awards, but their value transcends such sickly trifles.

To call *Dreamcatcher* one of her finest films would be a lie, as that would that it is superior to great past works such as *Divorce Iranian Style*, *Sisters in Law* and *Rough Aunties*. It's equal to those achievements in terms of its nose for an issue or problem rather than a contrived "story", its expert ability to single-out "characters" and the fluid, compact nature of its structure. The film documents the grim travails of one Brenda Myers-Powell as she scours the the Chicago ghettos in her

Dreamcatcher mobile, dispensing counsel, contraception and a modicum of hope to the many prostitutes and abused women in the area. Once a sex worker herself, this, it turns out, is merely one of a number of pro-bono charitable activities she undertakes, realising that her coalface Samaritan work is only a short-term solution.

Alongside heading-up confessional meetings at a women's prison, Brenda hosts after-school workshops in which she attempts to communicate to local teenagers – often through humour and song – what abuse is and how it tends to ruin lives. The heartbreaking core of *Dreamcatcher* examines the notion that, in these poor communities that have seemingly been left as self-governing barter towns by local authorities, this top-down neglect has led to sexual violence becoming naturalised. The prevalence of abuse is only part of the problem – it's the fact that young people have been conditioned into thinking that a ritualistic beating or forced sexual encounter is a rite of passage.

Longinotto's rare skill is in that she makes advocacy documentaries by stealth, espousing the work of certain people and groups without ever having to explicitly state the fact. She trusts her images and her subjects to speak

for themselves, and she also trusts the viewer to see what is in front of them and deduce accordingly. While she remains a silent champion of altruistic women, her films are about the gruelling struggles of people who rail against a society in which their rights have needs are not under consideration. There are extremely haunting moments in this film, and the extent of human suffering depicted is at times almost unfathomable. Yet as with Longinotto's simple, bracingly forthright filmmaking mode, the solution comes from rolling up your sleeves, pounding the pavements and taking names.

DAVID JENKINS

ANTICIPATION. *Not to be confused with Lawrence Kasdan's 2003 hippy-horror trainwreck.*

4

ENJOYMENT. *Deeply unsettling, yet the saintly qualities of Brenda Myers-Powell are not up for debate.*

4

IN RETROSPECT. *Documentaries are movies too, and Longinotto is one of the UK's best filmmakers.*

4

Kim Longinotto

One of Britain's foremost documentary makers tells *LW Lies* about the film that changed her life.

Kim Longinotto's films provide enlightening portraits of female abuse survivors across the globe. She has documented life after female genital mutilation in Kenya (*The Day I Will Never Forget*) and the path from violent incarceration to liberation and poetry (*Salma*). She has captured woman in the judicial system in Iran (*Divorce Iranian style*), in Cameroon (*Sisters in Law*) and chronicled activism on the streets of India (*Pink Saris*). Her latest, *Dreamcatcher*, sees Longinotto embedded in the outreach work of Brenda, a saintly and charismatic former prostitute based in Chicago [See review opposite]. *LW Lies* spoke to the director who explained what she is trying to do with her filmmaking, using the example of a film that greatly touched her, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's 2006 drama, *The Lives of Others*.

"*The Lives of Others* changed my life and it's been the biggest inspiration. What that film is saying is that by being taken into the lives of others, you look at your own life and you reevaluate it and it changes you and empowers you to be somebody else. At the end of the film, the guy in the book shop says, 'Do you want this book wrapped? Is it a present?' and Ulrich says, 'No, this is for me.' I burst into tears when he said that. I thought, 'Kim, this is pathetic, why are you crying? All he's said is "this is for me".' Then I thought, 'Yeah but this *is* for me.' It really got me. The ending was so truthful and so understated. It wasn't all Hollywood-y with the violins and the build-up. It was simple: 'No this is for me'.

"That film is my dream of what I might be able to do one day. Make a film where people are



watching the lives of others – brilliant title – and it means something to them and they say, 'This film is for me.' I felt *Boyhood* was for me. I hated adults when I was growing up. They were like all the fathers Mason had, always telling you off or telling you that you were wrong or what to do. I identified really strongly with the boy and I loved the ending. I identified with the ending and I thought, 'Oh, *Boyhood's* for me. This is my sort of film.' It's a lovely feeling. It doesn't happen very often. *The Kid with a Bike* was for me. It happens... you can count them on one hand.

"That's what I want to do. I want people to watch *Dreamcatcher*. Whether that'll happen... I'm getting gradually better, I think, and I hope some people will think, 'Brenda's my friend, I love her, I know her. She's helped me.' They won't think of me, they'll think of her. She'll be a little window that opens into their

lives and changes something. I'm not saying it's for people to change their life in a material way, but it'll change the way they see their lives or the way they see the world.

"That's what's so clever about *The Lives of Others*. It's not out on the streets, it's something much deeper, much more gentle and it takes longer to sort out what it means. I had to sit on a bench outside and work out why I was crying – 'It's a happy ending, Kim!' – and to work out why I was so moved. It was like – and I'm sounding like such a wuss here – tears of inspiration. I've never forgotten that. It made me believe that we can do something by what we write, by what we read, by the films we make and by the music we play.

"There have always been tracks that really meant something to me, starting with Joy Division and now Hot Chip. Do you know the track 'I Was A Boy From School'? 'We try but we don't fit in.' I remember hearing that and thinking 'Oh god! This is fantastic. I love these guys.' It keeps happening in all these different ways. That's why people say that music is the soundtrack of their lives. You latch onto something that means something to you.

"These things help us to not feel alone and not feel so weird. A lot of the time I do feel weird. I feel I'm different and I'm weird. And I'm not. I've got really lovely friends and I watch things and I realise that we're not weird, but society – well it's not even society but the world – tries to make us feel weird when we don't fit in with the images that we see" 🎧



Still Alice

Directed by **RICHARD GLATZER, WASH WESTMORELAND**
 Starring **JULIANNE MOORE, KRISTEN STEWART, ALEC BALDWIN**
 Released **6 MARCH**

"It feels like my brain is fucking dying," says Dr Alice Howland (Julianne Moore), a world-renowned linguistics professor with a penchant for playing 'Words with Friends.' The foundation of Alice's life and work begins to crumble when she is diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease at the age of 50. An adaptation of Lisa Genova's bestselling 2007 novel, the film chronicles Alice's struggle as her memory slowly but steadily slips away from her.

While *Still Alice* shares a number of uncanny similarities with the modern maudlin weepie (tragedy, beaches, an excess of emotion) it never lurches into the realm of Sparksian melodrama. What keeps the film from feeling cloying or manipulative is its insistence on exploring the dissolution of Alice's interior intellectual rather than sentimental world. For Alice, who openly admits to having always been defined by her intellect, forgetting the name of her son's girlfriend is somehow less traumatic than forgetting philological terminology. By keeping a tight focus on Alice's intellectual identity, the film offers an uncomfortably intimate insight into one woman's self-fashioning and the untimely unravelling of said.

Moore manages to exude both maternal warmth and cerebral gracefulness as Alice.

However, the real surprise is not the adeptness of Moore's performance but the film's stellar supporting cast: Alec Baldwin as her doting but selfish husband John (also an academic); Kate Bosworth as an uptight auburn urbanite and their oldest daughter; and Kristen Stewart's Lydia — the baby of the family and an aspiring actress living in Los Angeles. Stewart, as the family's most emotionally expressive member, radiates a likeable low-key charm that is a welcome change from the actress's usual screen sulkiness. Lydia's relationship with her mother serves as the emotional lynchpin of the film; from their Skype conversations to their boardwalk strolls, Stewart and Moore's palpable onscreen chemistry is always rewarding to watch. As the tough-talking Lydia softens upon her return to New York, Alice slowly hardens, her lucidity a heartbreakingly distant memory trapped behind permanently glazed eyes.

Though it's downer subject matter in a general sense, Alice is permitted brief flashes of respite. Speaking elegantly about her condition on stage, she maintains that she is "not suffering," but simply "struggling." That's not to say that directing duo Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland shy away from Alice's darker moments. "I wish I had cancer," she hisses, while another scene sees her record a suicide note to herself — replete

with detailed instructions — in the form of a Photo Booth video. Alice's downward spiral often feels irredeemably bleak, characterised by the existential anger that accompanies injustice.

It's a film which explores the fate of New York's self-appointed intelligentsia, and is duly set against the backdrop of the Upper West Side in all its rainy, leafy opulence. This part of the city seems to be a safe space to explore the self-actualisation of the privileged — and perhaps the thing that stops the film from veering into the territory of triteness. "You were relentless; you wanted everything and all at once," John tells Alice of her youth. In *Still Alice*, that restless desire is something the thing that is dissolving right in front of our eyes. **SIMRAN HANS**

ANTICIPATION. *Looks like a Nicholas Sparks adaptation.*

2

ENJOYMENT. *Julianne Moore is really good at crying.*

4

IN RETROSPECT. *An absorbing portrait of one woman's interior landscape.*

4



Top Five

Directed by **CHRIS ROCK**

Starring **CHRIS ROCK, ROSARIO DAWSON, GABRIELLE UNION**

Released **13 MARCH**

The idea of listing one's top five hip-hop artists is a conversational meme that seems to come out of nowhere in *Top Five*. Apart from the fact that the work was coproduced by Kanye and Jay-Z, it's there, we suppose, to represent a nostalgic harkening back to our formative cultural influences. Strange that in such a New York movie, nobody puts Wu Tang on their list – although Tracy Morgan's character does have Ghostface. Who's on your top five?

This is a movie about reflection. Rock, as writer, director and leading man, casts himself as Andre Allen, a standup turned movie star, famous for blockbusting but artistically bankrupt Hammy-the-talking-bear flicks ("It's Hammy time!"), now attempting to go serious with an artistically bankrupt and destined-to-flop Haitian revolution epic called Uprize! Breaking away from the junket trail, Allen spends an afternoon wandering Manhattan with the unusually frank *New York Times* journalist Chelsea Brown (Dawson), who wants him to reveal his true self. And so we have Rock, as auteur and actor, ruminating on the nature of entertainment, the lonely view from the top, the tolls our choices take on our souls, and how exciting it is when a person or topic comes along to make us feel alive.

Rock is a cinephile, who previously remade Eric Rohmer's *Chloe in the Afternoon* as *I Think I Love My Wife*. Here, in the crossroad of Allen, he channels the crisis of success Adam Sandler faced in *Funny People*, and in the walking-and-talking freeflow of his and Dawson's interaction, he makes his bid at something like Richard Linklater's *Before* series or Woody Allen's greatest comedy-dramas. So far, so good, you might think. But it's not enough for him to cover life, career and interpersonal spark.

Andre is also uncomfortably engaged to a reality TV star, so we get further parody of empty celebrity culture and agony about being forced into that world. And he's a former addict, so we get a movie about addiction. And so is Chelsea, so it's about two people in recovery supporting and challenging each other. And there's the issue of returning to the old neighbourhood and feeling self-conscious about success. And there's single parenthood. And there's a blossoming romance, which is further complicated by both of these people being in relationships. And maybe Chelsea's boyfriend is gay. And there's a feud with a mysterious film critic. And there's Obama. And a slate of supporting appearances from the likes of Seinfeld and Whoopi.

It's possible to juggle disparate strands in one coherent work. *Annie Hall* did. And Rock actually does a fine job when he's nakedly scattershot – a slapstick flashback involving Cedric the Entertainer, and a hilarious prison cameo involving DMX channelling Charlie Chaplin, both slot satisfyingly into the more shaded moments. But the overall taste in *Top Five* is that of an overeager cook who throws in so many herbs the flavour is actually neutralised. It's telling that Andre's career trajectory is not that similar to Rock's – instead of pouring his heart out, he's riffed on a list of themes, and more like fifty when five would have sufficed. **IAN MANTGANI**

ANTICIPATION. *Chris Rock as auteur, armed with a killer cast.*

4

ENJOYMENT. *A film you keep willing to succeed, even as it keeps misstepping.*

3

IN RETROSPECT. *Rock might end up a sharper filmmaker if he learned how to subtract.*

3



White Bird in a Blizzard

Directed by GREGG ARAKI

Starring SHAILENE WOODLEY, EVA GREEN, CHRISTOPHER MELONI

Released 6 MARCH

In a nostalgia driven coming-of-age tale that drips with all the suburban portent of a Gregory Crewdson photograph, Kat (Shailene Woodley) narrates the events surrounding the disappearance of her unbalanced mother, Eve (Eva Green). Based on the novel by American fiction writer Laura Kasischke, *White Bird in a Blizzard* is a poetic mystery, deeply entrenched itself in an '80s aesthetic, boasting a sonorous soundtrack by the Cocteau Twins Robin Guthrie and superlative cinematography which takes its form in a series of simple suburban tableaux populated by boys-next-door, day-glo costumes and soulless shopping malls. But if this sounds like typical Araki fare you'll quickly find yourself far from the narratively unconventional and provocative queer dramas of yore. *White Bird* isn't retreading the subcultural kaleidoscope of the Teen Apocalypse Trilogy, instead making new ground with a number of almost coy literary left hooks.

In one of many narrated epiphanies, Kat pithily states one of the film's central contentions: "I felt like an actress, playing myself. A bad actress doing a shitty job." All the characters in *White Bird* wrestle with their predestined roles, performing them

adequately at times but never quite fulfilling them to theirs or anyone else's satisfaction. The acting is fine, but often pointedly off-kilter, as varying styles sit uncomfortably astride one another, with more straight-laced turns coming from Christopher Meloni (as Kat's father) and Woodley, while Eva Green's snarlingly overwrought execution evokes Joan Crawford-esque Old Hollywood *grande dames*. Eve is a lurching, unhappy, embittered drunkard, pining for lost youth. For her, the elaborately staged Americana quickly became bloodless and entrapping. Domesticity is empty, repetitive and loveless.

Even in Eve's absence, *White Bird* harks back to film and literature's foreboding first wives and disappeared women. A cameo by Sheryl Lee (*Twin Peaks* Laura Palmer) feels apt, but even sans this obvious cultural hat-tip, Eve's legacy looms large in the Connor household like The First Mrs de Winter in Daphne Du Maurier's 'Rebecca' or Antoinetta Mason, the original 'madwoman in the attic' from 'Jane Eyre'. Dialogue and scenes continuously allude and drop clues to this: "sometimes I thought... she was going to burn the house down." But Eve doesn't get to dance on the fiery balustrades of Thornton Hall, she merely disappears.

Standing on the threshold of adulthood, beyond increasingly impulsive actions and a growing nihilistic streak, Kat seems outwardly untouched by her mother's unexplained disappearance. She wants to know where she's gone, but not to the extent that it's going to alter her social and sexual priorities. But beneath the adolescent insouciance, she's plagued by haunting dreams where she searches for Eve in a snowstorm. Her therapist dismisses them – "sometimes dreams are just dreams." But in Araki's world, dreams are never just that, and as the title suggests, viewers will instead have to search hard for hidden clues.

CORMAC O'BRIEN

ANTICIPATION. *An intriguing cast, a compelling premise.*

3

ENJOYMENT. *Madwomen in the attic.*

3

IN RETROSPECT. *An absorbing portrait of a woman, Gregg Araki continues to play exquisite corpse with film form.*

3

Gregg Araki

The mischievous indie auteur talks about the importance of shoegaze music to his new film, *White Bird in a Blizzard*.

As a filmmaker, I absolutely wasn't there in 1994 to make a movie like *White Bird in a Blizzard*. The difference between, say, *The Doom Generation* and this are a reflection of the differences in me then and me now. I'm older, hopefully wiser, technically I'm a much better filmmaker – every time you make a film you learn so much. Each movie is a snapshot of a certain time. *The Doom Generation* is where I was at in 1994. I don't spend time looking back at old movies. I was the subject of a retrospective in Toronto a few years back, so I was kinda forced to look at a bunch of clips. They're all flawed, but to me they're all perfect in their own way.

Slowdive are one of my favourite bands. I perform in Los Angeles and it was a life-altering experience. I'll never be the same. I never saw them in the '90s, and I always thought that I'd never get to see them. It was one of the sad things in my life. But they did a reunion tour recently. They played so much stuff – my only regret is that they didn't play very much from *Just For a Day* which is my favourite Slowdive album. They played all of *Souvlaki* and they played almost all of the three EPs. It was mind-blowing.

That's one of things about *White Bird* being set between 1988 and 1990. I made my first movie in 1987, so it's basically going back to when I first started working. The book the film is based on takes place in Ohio, and slightly earlier, 1985 I think. I purposely moved it to California in the late '80s so it would be closer to my own experience. Musically, I wanted to pay homage to all these bands that had made such a profound impression on me. It's been such an important part in my own coming of age. In the book, when



Kat and Phil meet at the highschool dance, Journey is playing. That's one of things I wanted to change – I made Kat and her friends more of the cool outsiders, so in the movie they're at a goth club that was very much modelled after goth clubs in which I spent a lot of time during my twenties. We listened to a lot of Siouxsie Sioux and Depeche Mode. That music and culture were so important to me. I just wanted to pay tribute to that.

But it seems shoegaze is making a comeback. Lush are a band I was talking to a friend about just the other day. Ride have gotten back together and they're touring. My Bloody Valentine had a new album out. Slowdive came back. Chapterhouse came back. I heard a rumour that Lush were having a reunion as well. It was something I'm sure I read on the internet,

and then looked again and couldn't find it. It seems like Emma Anderson was saying they wouldn't get back together. But I love Lush – they are on *The Doom Generation* soundtrack. They're on the *Nowhere* soundtrack. I saw them a couple of times during the '90s. I love the dynamic of Lush with Miki and Emma – the two of them fronting this band and they were both so damn cool. They were like these goddess figures. I remember reading an interview with Miki after the split where she was saying that she's a mother now and that she's done with the whole band thing. Yet that was one of the amazing things about seeing Slowdive – they're all older now and they have kids, but when they got up there on stage, it was like it was 1990 all over again. I really liked the new My Bloody Valentine album too – it made me feel a great sense of nostalgia for my youth.

I remember having coffee with Robin Guthrie from the Cocteau Twins – he's a huge idol of mine. He did the soundtracks for *Mysterious Skin* and *White Bird*. I remember him talking about the start of the Cocteau Twins and how, in his mind, even though their music sounded very produced and purposeful, they were just a punk rock band and they did whatever they wanted. And I think that's the exact same way I make my movies. I grew up with these bands – I was in high school when the Sex Pistols got big, so I got all the new wave and post-punk music when I got to college. That was when it was all really happening. That music got to me when I was at my most culturally vulnerable. It formed me as a person. And it formed me as a filmmaker. Making *White Bird* was a chance to go back there.



A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence

Directed by ROY ANDERSSON
 Starring HOLGER ANDERSSON, NILS WESTBLOM, CHARLOTTA LARSSON
 Released 24 APRIL

The third and final instalment of Roy Andersson's "trilogy about being a human being", *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* is very much of a piece with *Songs From the Second Floor* from 2000 and its follow-up, 2007's *You, The Living*. Each of the three films comprises a series of darkly comic vignettes captured by an unmoving camera with a focus so deep it borders on the infinite. Andersson's spartan but immaculate sound stages are populated by non-professional actors, who are caked in pale makeup that makes them appear zombified and suspended between states of being.

But if Andersson's latest has an air of the familiar, the maturation of the film's ideas, the indelibility of its images, and the fluency with it speaks to its maker's previous work cements *Pigeon* as a vital installment to the trilogy. In fact, that relative sameness becomes Andersson's ultimate theme, the film's unspeakably perfect last shot a direct rebuttal to the idea that things should – or even could – be any other way.

While *Pigeon* is the most inviting of Andersson's films, it eventually reveals itself as a trap. Named after a bird perched above the action in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's "Hunters in

the Snow", the film begins with a morbid triptych of scenes that Andersson helpfully introduces as "three meetings with death". These introductory skits function as a primer for Andersson's style, acclimating viewers to a film world unlike any other. Part recap and part seduction, the prologue's true purpose is a bit more nefarious than it seems: Andersson is planting the seeds of complicity, imploring his audience to smile, chuckle, and then laugh at the mortal misfortunes of others. It's an impulse that he'll stoke for the next 100 minutes before unleashing an antepenultimate scene of unfathomable horror that confronts the crowd with their own secondhand inhumanity.

In the film's incredible centerpiece, which can be identified as one of narrative cinema's most impressive long-takes by the time it's half over, two characters have an encounter with Sweden's King Charles XII, an early 18th century sovereign remembered for his bloodthirsty aggression towards other countries. In this one shot, Andersson refracts the intrinsic power of the time-image through the lens of time itself so that the inertia of history is felt in minutes and centuries alike. The set-up achieves a transcendent state of suspended animation, as though every person in

the shot has been taxidermied alive. Andersson's jaw-dropping reach into the past is made possible by the technology of the present, taking advantage of his digital camera and its capacity to shoot for stretches of uninterrupted time far longer than film permits.

Whereas *Songs from the Second Floor* and *You, The Living* both ended on notes of despair, *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* resolves with a cathartic sigh of acceptance, and maybe even hope. Its last act is one of simple generosity, and in a single moment Andersson's trilogy of self-contained suffering blossoms into a unified still-life.

DAVID EHRLICH

ANTICIPATION. *For Roy Andersson die-hards, this might as well be The Return of the Jedi.*

5

ENJOYMENT. *Just see it, okay?*

5

IN RETROSPECT. *Caps off one of the greatest trilogies ever made.*

5



The Water Diviner

Directed by **RUSSELL CROWE**

Starring **JAI COURTNEY, OLGA KURYLENKO, RUSSELL CROWE**

Released **3 APRIL**

REVIEWS

Russell Crowe has always been unpredictable, both onscreen and off. It should come as no surprise, then, that his directorial debut is a tonally seesawing movie mishmash. *The Water Diviner* is an earnest family drama, a bruising battle film, a haplessly executed romance, with culture clashes and international politics thrown in for bonus befuddlement.

It's a film that radiates with its director's good intentions, from the sun-streaked outback opening – where an unassisted Crowe digs a well in a brazen feat of super-strength – to its attempt at a gently humorous, heart-warming finale. But Crowe and cinematographer Andrew Lesnie lay the glow on so thick it's as if much of what we see is encased in amber.

Set four years after World War One's bloody Battle of Gallipoli, it follows Crowe's indomitable Australian farmer Connor as he travels to Turkey where his three ANZAC soldier sons are missing in action, presumed dead. Stepping off the boat in Istanbul laden largely with his own imposing, unrefined masculinity, Connor is immediately at sea in a city of bold colours and floating fabrics. He's singled out by a boy, Orhan (Dylan Georgiades), who leads

him to the hotel of his beautiful mother Ayshe (Olga Kurylenko), a woman who has enjoyed a liberated lifestyle under European rule and who catches Connor's eye. She's in denial about the death of her husband and is involved in a cat and mouse courtship with her husband's conservative brother Omer (Steve Bastoni), who is determined to take her as his second wife.

Later, when Connor travels to Gallipoli, he adapts his talent for water divining to the task of locating his boys' bodies, to the bemusement of the assembled forces, befriending both an Australian in charge of identification (Jai Courtney) and a Turkish major (Yilmaz Erdogan), with the latter showing him great kindness and assistance in his quest.

Crowe's ability to concisely communicate the horrors of war impresses, but his first narrative feature as director is also hugely disjointed. Although it boasts ferocious flashbacks and thankfully doesn't endorse invasion or colonialism, the film offers a superficial treatment of the subject matter that fails to articulate any real insight, be it psychological or historical. It's also occasionally prone to horrendous caricatures (the British stereotypes

are especially awful) and other moments of astonishing misjudgement.

Most problematically, the film's fairly noble ambitions are frequently thwarted by a tendency toward extreme sentimentality. *The Water Diviner* is almost completely undone by its laughable romantic scenes, which are as preposterous as perfume ads. A trip to an ancient cistern that begins frostily evolves into a playful water fight, relayed in barking mad slow-mo, while a whispered parting is the less-than-sexy, 'Be careful on the tiles.' Note to Crowe for next time: keep the war, ditch the romance. **EMMA SIMMONDS**

ANTICIPATION. *Russell Crowe has lost his lustre in recent years.* **3**

ENJOYMENT. *Spirited, sincere and unintentionally silly.* **3**

IN RETROSPECT. *Sadly, it's only the ludicrous moments that really stay with you.* **2**



Appropriate Behaviour

Directed by **DESIREE AKHAVAN**

Starring **DESIREE AKHAVAN, REBECCA HENDERSON, SCOTT ADSIT**

Released **6 MARCH**

A witheringly dry comedy about a young person trying to make sense of herself amidst the ridiculousness of modern Brooklyn, *Appropriate Behaviour* doesn't just sound like a recent American indie, it sounds like all of them. But Desiree Akhavan's warm, funny and honest feature debut – in which the writer/director essentially plays the person she used to be – towers above the crowd precisely because its maker seems to have vanquished the insecurities of her on-screen proxy.

A low-budget movie made by someone graduating from a low-budget web series (Akhavan's show, *The Slope* brought great honour to its format), *Appropriate Behaviour* has all the superficial hallmarks of a first film, and Scott Adsit (aka the bald guy from *30 Rock*) is by far its biggest name. Nevertheless, it's immediately clear that, unlike so many other inaugural efforts, this is a movie made by someone who knows exactly who she is, even if she had to learn it the hard way.

It's all there in the conviction with which the recently single Shirin (Akhavan) retrieves her ex-girlfriend's massive dildo from a trashcan in the film's first scene. Things didn't

end well with Maxine (Rebecca Henderson), who resented Shirin for not coming out to her traditional Persian parents, and much of the film is devoted to temporally erratic flashbacks of their relationship as Shirin tries to unpack what went wrong.

Lena Dunham's *Girls* is the obvious reference point here, and it's hardly a coincidence that Akhavan was cast in that show's fourth series – you can practically hear Dunham fire off an email to her casting director as Shirin looks into Maxine's eyes and says, "I hate so many things, too" before moving in for their sweet first kiss. And though Akhavan is attuned to the cultural specificity of her experience in a way that better allows her film to straddle the line between the universal and the intimately personal, she shares Dunham's gift for laughing at the absurdity of a world that doesn't seem to have any place for her in it, and the shame that can make someone feel.

Woody Allen might be a more accurate comparison, however, and not just because the movie's fractured chronology is so evocative of Annie Hall. Akhavan shares Allen's talent for being on the border of every scene she's in; even in the film's centrepiece scene, a hilariously

awkward three-way involving way too much latex, Shirin is both a participant and an observer, Akhavan knowing that the character will all find this funny one day.

For all of its matter-of-fact modesty, however, *Appropriate Behaviour* comes uniquely into its own as Shirin comes into hers. Akhavan does small wonders with the role she was born to play, and by the time her film gets to its note-perfect conclusion, it's clear that she's nothing less than a true original.

DAVID EHRLICH

ANTICIPATION. *It's a Sundance movie about a young Brooklynite with an identity crisis.*

2

ENJOYMENT. *Desiree Akhavan's debut is as funny as it is painfully true.*

4

IN RETROSPECT. *A vital new voice, one we hope to be hearing a lot more of.*

4

Desiree Akavan

The writer/director and star of *Appropriate Behaviour* talks about using personal experience as a passport to creativity both as a teenager and now.

I always put on plays growing up. I started writing scripts aged nine. But those were really silly. I had something called 'Friday Night Live', which was a sketch show I wrote when I was 10 and I had a fake advert for something called 'vomlette', the omelette made of vomit. I always made really stupid, sketchy things but then at 15, I had a teacher in my life who cast me as my first lead in a play. I did a lot of acting when I was a kid and she just listened to my stories and was always laughing at the funny parts and really encouraged me at a time when no one else wanted to hear me talk at all. She had a play and I auditioned for it. You had to do a British accent.

"So this teacher heard my horrible audition with this fake cockney accent and she said, 'I feel like you're subconsciously telling me not to cast you because you want to write a play.' And I was like, 'That is a very generous way of rejecting a person and not casting them.' But she put a pen in my head and said, 'You should write a play about everything in your life right now,' and that was the first time that I made something that wasn't super silly and over-the-top. It was very personal. I wrote a play about everything I was dealing with in my life at the time. I had been diagnosed with depression and anxiety when I was 13. I had been on meds and was really struggling, so I wrote about it and all the kinds of things that any self-respecting 15-year-old would have way too much shame to share with their peers. But I did it, and it was so exciting and ever since then I have been writing.

"I wrote the first draft of *Appropriate Behaviour* while I was making *The Slope* which is a web series and the experience of the web series



was invaluable because we shot it really quick, really cheap and just did not think twice about anything, which was really exciting. We'd shoot each episode in a week. For *Appropriate Behaviour*, from the first draft of the feature script to the premiere at Sundance was two years, which compared to the web series was quite long but compared to most indie films is quite short. I had this momentum from doing the show and feeling like anything was possible – clear optimism which was unearned! – but I put that energy into the first draft and that was when my producer, Cecilia Fruguele, joined and together we reimagined it as something that we could do within our means but that would tell a wider story because *The Slope* was just about this couple and that was my frame of mind – a comedy

about a couple. We're very close, old friends so she can give me perspective on myself, so she came in and was like 'I think your background and your family is really fascinating. You should put that into the script'. At the time I was dealing with the aftermath of coming out to my family so it was in the forefront of my mind. And I really did want to show a closeted character that had a coming out story that was unlike others I had seen in films before.

"When I see the film I don't see me and my past, I see what everyone contributed to it. I see Cecilia's influence on the script, I see my cinematographer Chris Teague's work. I see my other actors. I see what we made together. They put so much of themselves into it so it really does feel like there are more people responsible for the success of this than me. It's true, whenever there's anything negative about it then it's crushing because that feels like my own failure but I think it's hard for directors no matter what. You could be making something about a leprechaun in Ireland and it would still feel very personal. With every filmmaker that you meet you feel that they are their movies: their aesthetic, their way of speech, their tone. Whenever you watch or read something negative it is personal, no matter what you've made so I think that avoiding reading anything sounds really good. Even the praise feels weird. There's nothing that eats away at you like reading about yourself in the third person. Whatever I am for that critic is not healthy for me to know because it has so much to do with that person and what they're bringing to the table and nothing to do with me." ●

On Set... With Jacques Gites

Dispatch Number Seven: *Saturday Night Fever*
New York, July 1979

When I took my seat at Comiskey Park Stadium on 12 July 1979, I thought I was ready for anything. It was the Baseball World Cup final between Chicago and Detroit, I was young and my chilli dog was firm and sauced to perfection. Little did I know that I'd soon be choking on both it and the acrid taste of prejudice.

Why? Let me take you back a few years, to a more innocent age. I was in NYC visiting an old school pal from my Stowe days, a guy called Chevy Chase who you probably know best as star of *Oh Heavenly Dog* and *Deal of the Century* but who, back then, was a diehard theatre person. One night, I ducked out of his off-off-Broadway *Othello* – thrillingly reimagined as a power struggle between warring street gangs in present-day New York, Chev's Harlem jivetalk spot-on, naturally – and took a stroll through the peril-laced neon night.

I wandered long; perhaps guided by some journalistic instinct. I somehow found myself on West 54th Street, home of CBS studios and a fine place to pick up the latest on east-coast entertainments. At the time I was a columnist for *Titbits* magazine in the UK which, like *Cahiers*, had become a second home for maverick directors and cinematic visionaries: Greenaway and Jarman were regular contributors, while Ken Loach did the telly pages for years. I'd just taken over Terence Davies's column, 'Only In America!', a sideways look at the capers of our transatlantic showbiz cousins (he held on to the Puzzle Page with a death grip, however). What greeted me, however, was something even more magical than the hoped-for balding suit half cut on hospitality booze and ready to the spill the beans: someone was making a movie.



A misunderstanding meant that I'd been absent from Pinewood Studios on lawyers' advice for a while (long story) but the arc lights, foul language and air of passive-aggressive bonhomie brought it all back. This was where I belonged. I lit a Gaullois, leaned against the wall and took a deep drag as I inhaled the scene. 'Saturday Nite Fever (sic)' read the clapperboard, a second-unit guy, busy hectoring a line of hep young cats dressed for an Antibes yacht party in the chill New York night. From somewhere within the building boomed an infectious rhythm that spoke of both primeval lust and modern, expensive narcotics and/or private jets. I was no stranger to the discotheque – Martine's nightclub had seen to that – but this was more like, I don't know... a tribal rite.

I had a choice, and I made it. I never went back to Chev's place; in fact, I didn't see him again until 1998, when I stepped over him as he lay soiled and gurning on the floor of LA's The Viper Rooms. That night I mingled with the birds of paradise that inhabited

New York's glitterball wunderland and, yes, I drank deep of their waters. When I awoke the next morning amid a tangle of naked limbs and man-made fibres, I was changed forever. It's no secret that I spent many months as a kind of vampire, sustained only by the rhythm of the night (and drink). It was during this time that I wrote my seminal piece on youth culture nightlife, about the kid who toted cans of paint by day and was an ace face on the scene by night. To my surprise, it was picked up to be adapted for the screen and the rest, as they say, is history: *Brushstrokes* became one of the longest running sitcoms on the BBC, and can still be seen regularly in the UK on Gold and Gold+1.

I left those dancing days behind when some promoter friends got the wrong end of the stick over a financial arrangement – these things happen! – but I always kept a little stardust in my soul. Which is why, on that night in Comiskey Stadium, as a million rock 'n' roll bigots cheered a burning pyre of disco records in the infamous Disco Demolition Night – a Krystalnacht to Remember, if you will – I found myself on my feet, roaring in defiance. A fierce man with short hair around the sides and long hair at the back – I believe it's a style called a "mullet" – dashed the Big Gulp from my hands and pointed in my face. Timidly, I sat down amid the mob. There was no point in getting duffed up, I reasoned. Instead, as black smoke filled the stadium, I pulled a little of that dancefloor stardust from deep inside, closed my eyes and smiled. They could burn the records, the could say "Disco Sux!", but the sufferers of Saturday night fever everywhere: may we never be cured 🍷

A.



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Force Majeure

Directed by RUBEN ÖSTLUND

Starring JOHANNES KUHNKE, LISA LOVEN KONGSLI, CLARA WETTERGREN

Released 10 APRIL

Ruben Östlund's ski-resort comedy of social/psychological unease tries to operate at high altitude in more ways than one, aiming somewhere between early Mike Leigh and middle Michael Haneke. In ski parlance, Double Black Diamond terrain: experts only. But this tale of a holidaying Swedish family's escalating ordeal rife with mishap and dysfunction only intermittently soars – Blue Square stuff at best. It's a shame, because Östlund promised so much with his second feature, 2008's chillingly precise, quietly hilarious *Involuntary*. And while his 2011 follow-up *Play* fell disappointingly flat, *Force Majeure* was one of the critical hits of the 2014 Cannes Film Festival.

The film shoots for the soft target of bourgeois complacency with focus on genial thirtysomething Tomas (Johannes Bah Kuhnke). Escaping work with wife Ebba (Lisa Loven Kongsli) and two kvetching bairns in the French Alps, Tomas' inadequacies are revealed when a "controlled" avalanche threatens catastrophe. Abandoning his kin – but seizing his smart phone mid-scarper – Tomas compounds his sins by denying cowardice when Ebba idly mentions the incident among pals.

The plot thus pivots around a single moment of panic with Tomas spending the remainder of the film's two hours desperately trying to acknowledge/overcome his milquetoastishness, mainly through talky, interior scenes that exude incongruous theatricality alongside spectacular outdoorsy interludes. Östlund's experience of the milieu – he cut his teeth on skiing documentaries – is evident from the assured poise with which the artificial pseudo-paradise of Les Arcs is conjured, a zone of unsettlingly Cronenbergian accommodations and well-heeled discontents ("Here I am in this fancy hotel, and I'm not happy...") It's a repellently gilded bubble, ideal for such a punishment-of-luxury exercise, with the working classes tactfully invisible, bar one surly-sinister maintenance bloke, gazing implacably as he puffs a *verboten* indoors cigarette. He instinctively grasps that something is amiss; us too, via the interplay of Fredrik Wenzel's crystalline cinematography and Ola Flottum's jarringly intermittent orchestral score.

Force Majeure also indicts the ubiquity of technology, most obviously the smart phones by which so many in Europe (and beyond) have so quickly become obliviously enthralled. Ski-lift mechanisms appear as potential death-traps.

Motorised transport is alarmingly hazardous. The climax, in which a howlingly inept, automaton-like coach-driver (another disconcerting proletarian) struggles with mountain hairpins is heart-in-the-mouth hilarious. Such *Involuntary*-level excellence, however, shows up the rest of the film as an essentially hollow contrivance, more concerned with pushing hot buttons and sparking discussion than organically developing characters or probing complex issues. It's beautifully handled, but even dazzlingly stylish technical élan only gets one so far. *Involuntary* showed what Östlund's capable of. *Force Majeure* is like watching Killy or Vonn murdering nursery slopes: brilliant, breathtaking, facile, pointless. NEIL YOUNG

ANTICIPATION. *Snowballing hype post-Cannes.*

4

ENJOYMENT. *A wayward slalom, bedazzling at best.*

3

IN RETROSPECT.

Östlund's early promise receding fast. All downhill from here?

3



The Falling

Directed by CAROL MORLEY

Starring MASIE WILLIAMS, FLORENCE PUGH, MAXINE PEAKE

Released 24 APRIL

Every appendage on our body was crossed, and then wherever possible, the crossed appendages were crossed with one another, then we hung black cats above the door and tossed horseshoes under ladders, all in the hope that director Carol Morley's follow-up to her meditative doc hit *Dreams of a Life* would be a thing of shimmering greatness. Alas, this time it wasn't to be, as the director has delivered a very woolly, precious and nonsensical drama which flits and flails to its own off-tempo beat without a care in the world. In fact, a feeling of looseness, of casual naturalism is strained to the point where it looks as if the film is about to burst a blood vessel. It's hard to talk about, not because it's scattered with spoiler landmines or devious twists, more that not much happens for a painfully long stretch of time.

Perhaps in a pointed manoeuvre to bypass convention, Morley remains illusive as to who the film is actually about. Our best guess is Masie Williams' Lydia, a spiky yet needy pupil at a semi-rural girls' school whose story plays out some time during the 1960s. Her mother (Maxine Peake) appears as a cabaret pastiche of a frazzled destitute housewife with

a dented beehive hairdo and omnipresent fag to emphasise background nerviness. She refuses to leave the house, suffering quietly and clearly awaiting some kind of powder-keg showdown with her gobby daughter. Lucky for Lydia she has Abbie (Florence Pugh) to hang around with, a walking moral panic who's gained an appetite for sex, getting it whenever and wherever she can, even from Lydia's up-for-it older brother, Kenneth (Joe Cole). And then, people start fainting.

For much of the film, we are sold a succession of reasons as to why this "outbreak" is never given due attention by the faculty, by parents and by the students themselves. Like something out of an ill-conceived '80s John Hughes highschool comedy, Monica Dolan's chain-smoking head teacher Miss Alvaro remains knowingly unsympathetic towards the plight of her young charges, possibly highlighting a laboured point about a generational chasm between carefree teendom and the comic frigidity of middle age. Relationships are proposed and then discarded, members of the supporting cast dangled in front of the camera as somehow vital to the events we're seeing, only for them

to be swiftly sidelined and the focus trained elsewhere.

The problem is that you never feel that the performers aren't quite sure of the film in which they're starring, that they're not complicit with Morley's loftier, more experimental vision. *The Falling* mistakes obfuscation for mystery and coiled outrage for dread, so that when the next random thing happens, it comes across as *The Next Random Thing*, and not an impactful, logical (within its own world) progression of all that's come before. In all, an infuriating, wispy disappointment from one of Britain's brightest. **DAVID JENKINS**

ANTICIPATION. *Massive things expected from Morley after her knockout *Dreams of a Life*.*

5

ENJOYMENT. *Oh dear. There's ambition here, but it may well have been misplaced.*

2

IN RETROSPECT. *This one will divide opinion.*

2



The Tale of the Princess Kaguya

Directed by ISAO TAKAHATA

Starring (VOICES) ASAKURA AKI, KORA KENGO, ASAOKA YUKIJI, CHII TAKEO, HASHIZUME ISAO, MIYAMOTO NOBUKO, IJUIN HIKARU

Released 20 MARCH

“Once upon a time, long long ago, there lived an old bamboo woodcutter...” Along with the exquisitely layered and painted parchments that we see at the beginning of Studio Ghibli’s latest feature *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, these opening words, delivered by a reassuringly female voice, leave little doubt that we are entering the world of the fairy tale. The words also prime Japanese viewers to recognise the folk story known as ‘The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter’, written sufficiently ‘long ago’ to qualify as Japan’s oldest extant prose narrative. Yet even with the anime looking back so far, and with accompanying illustrations that evoke classical water colours more than vogueish 3D CGI, director/co-writer Isao Takahata (*Grave of the Fireflies*) is also slyly bringing his materials forward.

The key is in the change of title, and the associated focal shift from a male to a female character. For in taking the traditional story of a miraculous founding baby girl raised by a woodcutter and his wife, Takahata brings his own feminist spin to Kaguya’s coming of age, showing how this child of nature is repeatedly kept from happiness by the forces of patriarchy. The Woodcutter’s

misunderstanding (if it is that) of heaven-sent luxuries leads him to believe he must elevate Kaguya to acceptance and marriage amongst the earthly nobility – and so, with the best of intentions, he takes her away from her beloved countryside to a courtly urban life offering little freedom to women. The caged bird that Kaguya receives as a gift from a suitor comes with clear symbolic value.

In Isao Takahata’s version, the younger Kaguya falls somewhere between the curious toddler Mei from Miyazaki’s *My Neighbour Totoro* and the wild wood-dwelling heroine of 1997’s *Princess Mononoke*, before she is confined to a palatial mansion, constrained in her dress and manners, and offered up to a parade of eligible male suitors who are variously exposed as cheats, cowards and womanisers. This culminates in an approach by the Mikado himself, who far from the romantic lover of the original folktale, is here depicted as an over-entitled would-be rapist. Kaguya dreams of returning to the forest idyll, and to her one-time playmate Sutehmaru – but the bittersweet lesson in *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is that there is never really any going back, but only an eternal return to match the

cycles of the seasons or the phases of the moon. Kaguya’s early freedom and later oppression seem likely to repeat themselves.

When she first appears, Kaguya grows with unnatural speed, learning to roll, crawl and walk within the space of a few minutes, and visibly gaining in size and stature before the startled eyes of onlookers. Yet ironically, the greatest flaw of Takahata’s film is its excessive length and ponderous pacing, which will leave viewers feeling that they have almost witnessed Kaguya’s rites of passage in real time. The film’s immense visual beauty, however, is undeniable – and irresistible. **ANTON BITEL**

ANTICIPATION. *Isao Takahata Isao! Studio Ghibli!*

4

ENJOYMENT. *Visual beauty versus narrative drag. But when the beauty is this beautiful...*

4

IN RETROSPECT. *Feminism meets pessimism, as a young girl’s idyll is brought crashing down to earth.*

4

Isao Takahata

LWLies meets the other legendary director at Studio Ghibli to discuss the making of *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*

Isao Takahata is the director behind such animated Japanese classics as *Only Yesterday*, *Grave of the Fireflies* and *Pom Poko*. He's been one of the top men at Studio Ghibli since the mid-'80s, and the last movie he put his name to was 1999's comic strip-inspired family comedy, *My Neighbours the Yamadas*. His latest and possibly last film, *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, is an adaptation of the Meiji Era Japanese folktale, 'The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter,' concerning and mysterious young princess who's life has been accelerated by forces from the spirit world.

LWLies: You've been working on this project for a very long time. Why did it take so long to come to life?

Takahata: This is a famous story that is well known in Japan. There have been many attempts to adapt it for the bigscreen. When I was a young man, there was a project with a famous live-action director who was asked to direct an animated version of that story. For some reason, the animation studio I was working for were in a democratic mood so they asked employees to try and write an adaptation synopsis to work as a proposal. So I did one. The whole idea of asking was to see how people changed the original story. My proposal was not to change anything in the storyline, but to add new things. My proposal wasn't even considered. In the end, they just gave up on it. At that time, I wasn't in a situation where I would be directing the film – I was just a young animator. One day, eight years ago, this story came back to me, and I thought that it would be good to adapt this story using my original treatment from way back. I talked with Mr [Toshio] Suzuki, the producer. Even then, when I proposed it, I wasn't thinking that I would direct it. Mr Suzuki said, if you think it's so interesting, then you should do. I'm not such a great fan of that period in Japanese history – the Heian era. I tried to work on two other projects which couldn't be done, so I ended up working on this.



In your 1999 film *My Neighbours The Yamadas* a family find their daughter inside a bamboo tree. Were you thinking of this film when you were making that one?

I wasn't thinking seriously of anything when I used that motif. I was playing with it as an alternate to the way a crane would bring a baby to you. These are all old motifs that would be understandable to children.

This is the first time you have worked with the composer Joe Hisaishi. Why?

Mr Miyazaki announced that *The Wind Rises* would be his last feature film, and our two films were originally supposed to be released at the same time. But, it didn't happen, my film came out later, so it became possible to ask Mr Hisaishi to do the music. Mr Miyazaki and Mr Hisaishi started working together around the time of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* and, as a producer, I was very involved with work on the music. We knew each other very well, we knew we could rely on one another. Because he often works with Miyazaki I saw them as a duo, so always thought

it better to ask other composers to work with me. I didn't want to interfere. Since Miyazaki said it was his last film and, it seems, Mr Hisaishi said that he wanted to work with me, we thought why not.

The scene in which the princes are fighting for the hand of the princess ends with her running away and the animation style changes radically. Can you talk through your reasons for that?

I've wanted to use this style in a number of projects I've worked on – give the lines a sense of real violence – but haven't been able to. This style can express the violence of an action, but I also use it to show the violence of feelings. I thought about using that style of drawing on another project which was more about fighting each other, one on one. I thought it would fit, both physically and mentally. Regarding the use of drawn lines, I used the same approach I'd been using throughout the film. I was relying on the energy of the line as a way to reflect emotion. So when the character is calm, the lines reflect that. In Japan, it's a tradition for a film like this for lines to be drawn with brushes, but we used pencils so we could erase the lines. When you use brushes, you know that you can bring an energy to the line with the strength of each stroke. Brushes aren't consistent, which is exciting. Talking about brushes, you're probably thinking of drawing, but in Japan and China, they're used to write words and letters. When you draw something using lines, your drawing is not pretending to be real. It is clearly a perception, as the world doesn't have lines. The viewer has to imagine the real things that are hidden on the other side of the drawing. It appeals to imagination. But also, it appeals to personal memories. This is the reason why I make animated films. By using pencils instead of brushes, we were trying to channel that strength in a different way.

Glassland

Directed by **GERARD BARRETT**
 Starring **JACK REYNOR, TONI COLLETTE, MICHAEL SMILEY**
 Released **17 APRIL**



When it comes to depicting the agonising domestic ills of alcohol on screen, Gary Oldman pretty much sewed things up with his pulverising 1997 film *Nil by Mouth*. Still, props remain due to director Gerard Barrett for plumbing – if not quite transcending – the squalid depths of liquid self-harm with this minor-key drama about a young man left to tend to his trainwreck-of-a-mother. John (Jack Reynor) drives a taxi in a sleepy Dublin suburb, siphoning the scant fare money he makes into saving his ma Jean (Toni Collette) from chronic alcohol poisoning. Filmed in natural light so interiors are all made to look like dank, inhospitable prisons, the film offers a simple chronicle of a man who is torn between dedicating his life to solving the (possibly unsolvable) problems of another, or applying for

a passport and making a clean break from the dingy squalor. It's an impressive film that never quite breaks out of its slow canter, even when the actors are allowed their moment to let it all go. Reynor carries the film without breaking a sweat (no bad thing), and Collette delivers some of her strongest work in years, offering a curt reminder that she has great potential which is often squandered on poor material. Michael Smiley delivers a sensational supporting turn as a concerned AA counsellor, proving the way to build a captivating, empathetic presence on screen sometimes only requires the suppression rather than exaggeration of nuance – his line readings here are beyond perfect. But MVP here is Barrett who just feels every bit the natural filmmaker, knowing where to put the camera, where to place

his actors and where to cut the scene. *Glassland* doesn't manage to land any killer blows, but it's a remarkable demonstration of talent from all involved. **DAVID JENKINS**

ANTICIPATION. *Young lead Jack Reynor impressed in 2012's What Richard Did from.*

3

ENJOYMENT. *A proper film, robustly made and beautifully acted.*

3

IN RETROSPECT. *Gerard Barrett is 26. He will make a great movie by the age of 30. Bet on it.*

3

X+Y

Directed by **MORGAN MATTHEWS**
 Starring **ASA BUTTERFIELD, SALLY HAWKINS, RAFE SPALL**
 Released **13 MARCH**



Morgan Matthews' drama about maths, family and self-acceptance has been made using a balanced formula. Drawn from his 2007 documentary, *Beautiful Young Minds*, it deals in heavy emotional matters but with enough comedy to avoid sentimentality. Asa Butterfield, with his piercing blue eyes and convincing social awkwardness, says little as teenage maths whiz Nathan. His introversion stems from both biology and tragedy. Nathan struggles to decode people, perhaps due to his autism. He was also present when, as a young boy, his father died in a car crash. Flashbacks pepper the narrative – a disappointing, conventional touch in a film that is most powerful when flowing through gentle human interactions.

Butterfield is a compelling young star of inestimable promise but the supporting cast are luminous. As Nathan's mother Julie, Sally Hawkins

radiates maternal warmth just as she did in Paul King's *Paddington*, but this time, refracted through pain. Nathan idealises his dead dad and Julie struggles to mean as much to him.

As a multiple sclerosis afflicted maths tutor, Rafe Spall is the outsider who affords tonal relief. He has learnt to diffuse his suffering through wit, and extends this service to Julie and Nathan. A fabulous touch of physical comedy early on involving a joint sets the pitch of his contribution as he coaches Nathan in preparation for the International Mathematical Olympiad. Meeting other young maths prodigies is what enables Nathan to find his place in the world. During a cultural exchange, the opposite sex begin to make an impact too, especially Zhang Mei (Jo Yang). There are delightfully geeky flirtations, none better than:

"I like the Fibonacci Sequence too!" Charm and keen social observation offset the sense that characters are marching to the beat of predestined drama. Cheesiness sometimes wins out but for the most part this is a moving tale of an outsider progressing from trauma towards social integration. **SOPHIE MONKS KAUFMAN**

ANTICIPATION. *Great cast, but will the story add up to much?*

2

ENJOYMENT.
X+Y=C-H-A-R-M-I-N-G.

3

IN RETROSPECT.
Performances > material.

3

Lost River

Directed by **RYAN GOSLING**
 Starring **IAIN DE CAESTECKER,**
SAOIRSE RONAN, CHRISTINA
HENDRICKS
 Released **24 APRIL**



This is the stuff that memes are made off.

Composed as a series of increasingly abstract non sequiturs, Ryan Gosling's directorial debut borrows the dirt-smudged suburban decay of *Gummo*, the macabre eroticism of *Blue Velvet*, the karaoke kitsch of *Only God Forgives* and the fuzzy Cajun colloquialism of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and boils them down into a mind-boggling fantasia.

The dystopian plot loosely concerns a teenager named Bones (Iain De Caestecker), who wears a grubby white tee and permanent confused-frown and strips copper from derelict buildings to support his dear ma (Christina Hendricks), all the while attempting to evade Cadillac-cruising gangland deviant, Bully (Matt Smith). Along the way, Bones discovers a hidden reservoir with a row of street lights penetrating the eerily calm surface.

His neighbour (Saoirse Ronan) informs him that a once prosperous town now sits at the bottom of it, and so, naturally, he investigates.

Nicolas Winding Refn, Gosling's regular collaborator and creative kindred spirit, revealed in an interview with *LWLies* that every film he makes starts with a single image. In the case of *Only God Forgives*, it was "of a man looking at his hands and very slowly balling them into fists." If Gosling mimicked that approach, it's hard to tell what his jumping off point was. Was it the image of Matt Smith spinning around in a gold-sequined jacket repeatedly yelling "look at my muscles"? Or maybe it was Ben Mendelsohn crooning in a sub-Lynchian BDSM nightclub? Perhaps it was the image of an emo'd-up Saoirse Ronan gently sobbing while clutching the head of her recently decapitated pet

rat, Nick. Regardless of how painfully self-aware these scenes are, *Lost River* is enjoyably wacky in places, and it's hard not to admire Gosling's maverick approach to basic narrative structure.
ADAM WOODWARD

ANTICIPATION. *Will Ryan Gosling be as devastating behind the lens as he is in front of it?*

4

ENJOYMENT. *In a manner of speaking...*

2

IN RETROSPECT. *Total bollocks. But also kind of charming.*

2

A Second Chance

Directed by **SUSANNE BIER**
 Starring **NIKOLAJ COSTER-WALDAU,**
ULRICH THOMSEN, NIKOLAJ
LIE KAAS
 Released **20 MARCH**



The Dogme95 manifesto may now survive only as the hollow echo of last night's party, but it's far from an ancient relic in the heart of Danish filmmaker Susanne Bier. Though her latest is delivered with more Hollywood sheen than the raw bite of her own entry into the Dogme canon, 2002's *Open Hearts*, she's at least remained faithful in her own apparent directorial disdain for indulgence.

Yet, restraint is (still) not a word in Bier's lexicon, and it's a strange sight to see her once more return to that playground of inauthenticity that constitutes melodrama. Long-time collaborator and screenwriter Ander Thomas Jensen centres his tale on a detective (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau) who, after the sudden loss of his infant son, is driven to abduct the child he had fought to save from drug-addled, neglectful

parents. In the moment, it makes for an engaging drama, largely thanks to Bier's taut direction and a quartet of quality performances: Coster-Waldau's slowly cracking façade plays off against the wild eyes of his already unravelling wife (Maria Bonnevie). Across the social gulf, Nikolaj Lie Kaas and Lykke May Andersen brilliantly convey the raging terror and desperation which comes from an abusive relationship.

Step away from those elements and the essential flimsiness of the piece becomes apparent; indeed, there's something almost pathologically humorous in the idea of a man actually attempting to swap his dead child for another like it was a cracked Ming Dynasty vase. Artistic licence will only grant you so much mercy, and when a weak premise forms only the establishing platform for an entire series of "gotcha!" twists, the narrative

gets pushed dangerously close to the stuff of daytime soap opera. With style and content failing to gel, *A Second Chance* may just go to prove that Bier and Jensen aren't the perfect match they'd have us believe. **CLARRISE LOUGHREY**

ANTICIPATION. *At least it's not Serena, right?*

3

ENJOYMENT. *Boy, that guy who bangs his sister on Game of Thrones can really act!*

3

IN RETROSPECT. *Bier's innate talent fails to compensate for this movie's soap opera narrative.*

2



Traps

DVD

Almost as a clarion call for the squeamish to up sticks and leave the room, Czech feminist filmmaker Vera Chytilová's 1999 feature, *Traps*, opens on documentary footage of newly born piglets having their testicles removed with what looks to be a supermarket-bought razor blade. The small purple orbs are then discarded into a bucket as the animals scamper on with their business. It's the narrative foreshadowing of nightmares, implanting the thought that this procedure will likely happen again later in the film. And it certainly does, albeit with more of an emphasis on the comic than the horrific. Following an opening salvo documenting the garish, almost Pythonesque onslaught of capitalism in late-'90s Czechoslovakia, the film hones its wild focus onto a pair of slick-suited corporate bastards. One, Dohnal (Miroslav Donutil), is government minister, and his pal Petr (Tomas Hanak) works in advertising, and when charging down the motorway in their bright yellow sports car, they spot stranded damsel Lenka (Zuzana Stivínová), and in the guise of help, decide to take her to a secluded spot and rape her. It's a strange sequence and a tough one to watch, as Chytilová opts to film it as knockabout comedy in the vein of Chuck Jones, a tactic which at once normalises the action and makes them come across as even more barbaric and hateful. But Lenka has her revenge, as her skills as a veterinary surgeon come in handy when her two attackers fall into a daze when, feigning acceptance, she later drugs their drinks. It's a sprawling and unwieldy movie in which each scene goes on for just a minute too long, but it's sense of righteous anger is undeniable, allying it with Chytilová's feminist classic *Daisies* from 1966. Chytilová, who died in 2014 at the age of 85, receives a retrospective of her underseen work at London's BFI Southbank throughout March. **DAVID JENKINS**



Day Of Anger

| | |
|--|------------------------|
| Directed by TONINO VALERII | 1980 |
| Starring LEE VAN CLEEF GIULIANO GEMMA WALTER RILLA | Released 30 MAR |
| | Blu-ray |

Even though Tonino Valerii's *Day of Anger* arrived in the before the gunsmoke had cleared from Sergio Leone's spaghetti western lodestone, *A Few Dollars More*, you can already see the need to offer interesting variations on what is essentially a very limiting genre template. Yes, you still have the toothless huckster drenched in oily sweat, the well turned-out town tycoon who shows contempt for the town's underclasses, the shadowy ace gunslinger with a grudge to bear and the downtrodden naif who evolves into killing machine. Yet the way in which these archetypes are built out relies more on small deposits of colourful camp, and Valerii walks a very thin line between sincerity and parody. The final showdown between Lee Van Cleef's Talby and his one-time protégé Scott Mary (Giuliano Gemma) takes place in a standard-issue dirt thoroughfare, in front of a saloon which the former has acquired through ill-gotten gains. An atmosphere of high-seriousness is punctuated by the fact that the exterior of the bar is decorated with number of giant golden statues of pistols, making it resemble a cheapjack western theme pub for families. This arrives after a lengthy preamble in which Talby opts to "save" pusharound guy and career latrine scrubber Scott and teach him the rules of killin'. While Van Cleef is by far the most intriguing presence here (far outshining Gemma's perpetually gawping pretty-boy act), the reason to see this is for the new restoration which presents the wild primary hues of the cinematography at its most garishly eye-popping. Whether a film like this needed such lavish treatment remains a open to debate, but the team down at Arrow Films have, as usual, given it their all, and then some. **DAVID JENKINS**



Far From the Madding Crowd

| | |
|--|------------------------|
| Directed by JOHN SCHLESINGER | 1967 |
| Starring JULIE CHRISTIE TERENCE STAMP ALAN BATES | Released 27 APR |
| | DVD & Blu-ray |

Getting these grand literary adaptations right is no easy task. And when we say "right," we don't mean just getting the dialogue, accents and tonal inflections correct or making sure important moments are weighted amply against those that may be deemed so. It's more a matter of believability – when we can see a character we'd heretofore been forced to concoct in our own minds, it can sometimes make actions feel strained or, worse, contrived. The character of Bathsheba in Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd*, as played by Julie Christie in John Schlesinger's stately 1967 screen adaptation, is a strange one. In a certain light, she's a regal, ruthlessly independent proto-feminist who knows her own mind and is surrounded by doting male farmhands all looking to nab her hand in marriage. Yet seeing her character in the flesh, with the allure and charm that Christie naturally brings with it, her flighty decisions become tougher to comprehend. The story relates to how she remains helplessly blind towards the advances of caring and empathetic (if unromantic) male suitors (Alan Bates' bearded shepherd Gabriel and Peter Finch's sexless landowner Baldwood) in favour of a hot-blooded, sword-wielding playboy in the form of Terrence Stamp's Troy. While Bathsheba is the model of a Strong Female Character, it's a shame that her dominance is entirely defined by the men in her life. This film version makes it easier to swallow that bitter pill, mainly due to the Nicolas Roeg's kaleidoscopic cinematography which emphasises deep swatches of colour on the misty, pale landscapes. It's no British classic, but there's something highly relaxing and radical about the fact that Schlesinger articulates this story with breathy longeurs and it never feels like the text has been forcibly compressed for low attention spans. **DAVID JENKINS**



The Tattooed Swordswoman

Directed by
ISHII TERUO

1970

Starring
**KAJI MEIKO
TOKUDA HOKI
SATÔ MAKOTO**

Released **24 MAR**

Blu-ray

Blind Woman's Curse (or *The Tattooed Swordswoman*, as it's sometimes known) opens with one of the single coolest things that has ever been staged in front of a movie camera. Gales of rain pour down on a turf war between rival Japanese gangs in the early 20th century. On one side is the ruthless Tachibana clan, who are led into battle by their young new leader, Akemi (the great Meiko Kaji, an actress and musician whose legend Quentin Tarantino fondly rekindled on the soundtrack of *Kill Bill*). On the other stands a gaggle of day players not long for this world. After declaring her gang's violent intent, Akemi and the rest cast off their straw shawls and arrange themselves in formation, the tattoos that run along their backs completing a single dragon. One of four features that grindhouse auteur Ishii Teruo churned out in 1970, *Blind Woman's Curse* feels like it was Frankensteined together from any number of different ideas that Nikkatsu Studios had lying around. The thrust of the story, such as it is, takes place several years after the opening brawl, as the daughter of Akemi's initial enemy – blinded in that fight, and also cursed by a stray cat(?) – begins to insinuate herself into the local power struggle. A nearly coherent genre mishmash that juggles zoom-happy battle scenes with healthy doses of ribald comedy and even the occasional detour into J-horror, *Blind Woman's Curse* is at once both slapdash and inspired. Fusing together the residual energy from Seijun Suzuki's psychedelic '60s classics, Ishii creates a glorious B-movie mess that oozes creativity from every seam. In addition to boasting a spectacular transfer, Arrow Films' new Blu-ray includes an audio commentary by Japanese cinema expert Jasper Sharp that helps to properly contextualise the film and argues for its place in the pantheon. **DAVID EHRLICH**



The River

Directed by
JEAN RENOIR

1951

Starring
**PATRICIA WALTERS
NORA SWINBURNE
ESMOND KNIGHT**

Released **21 APR**

Blu-ray

Jean Renoir's *The River* is a sister film of sorts to Powell and Pressburger's *Black Narcissus* from 1947. Both films were based on works by the English author Rumer Godden and both explore the effect of a rugged male interloper upon an enclosed, female-dominated idyll. Whereas the latter film famously took place on an enclosed mountain ledge high up in the Himalayas, the former is set on a lush encampment on the banks of the Ganges river. The other key difference is that where *Black Narcissus* cultivates a mood of palm-sweating claustrophobia, Renoir lavishes in poetic asides and philosophical digressions, contextualising moments of intense intimacy against the daunting and beautiful incomprehensibility of existence and our uneasy interactions with nature. It's one of those masterpieces that it's near impossible to convey its qualities with anything approaching trenchant and pithy insight, other than to say that *The River* is less a film more than it is an atmosphere, a piece of meandering visual poetry that, despite offering rounded, empathetic, conflicted characters, operates simultaneously as traditional romance, kaleidoscopic dream-narrative and hymn to the arcadian majesty of India. It's as close to rough-hewn perfection as cinema gets, with scenes of bounding joy cut down in their stride by the harsh realisations of life's impermanence, nature's malevolence and love's contrariness. It's a film that would ideally be viewed on a spick-and-span 35mm print, but the folk down at Criterion are offering an optimal way to experience the scorching colours at home. This Blu-ray edition contains a 2004 interview with Martin Scorsese on the film, various essays (visual and written) and the 2008 documentary *Around the River* by Arnaud Mandagaran. It's a film in which unalloyed happiness has never seemed so unbearably sad. **DAVID JENKINS**



Without a Clue

Directed by
THOM EBERHARDT

Starring
MICHAEL CAINE
BEN KINGSLEY
JEFFREY JONES

1988

Released 31 MAR

Blu-ray

Long overdue for a revival of interest, considering the worldwide success of Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat's *Sherlock*, the most compelling mystery about this clever spoof of western literature's most famous detective is why it's been ignored for so long. Directed by Thom "Captain Ron" Eberhardt, the film begins in familiar territory, as two bumbling thieves try to steal a priceless artifact of some kind from a London museum. Unfortunately for these wannabe crooks, Sherlock Holmes (Michael Caine) and his faithful sidekick Dr Watson (Ben Kingsley) are one step ahead of them, waiting in the shadows with the police on standby. *Without a Clue*, it quickly becomes clear, is as much *Shakespeare in Love* as it is *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. In Eberhardt's film, Sherlock is hardly the detective extraordinaire he's cracked up to be. On the contrary, he's a complete buffoon. Watson, the story goes, invented the character (and hired a local actor for the part) so that he might be able to solve crimes incognito while applying for a job at a highbrow hospital. But Watson was perhaps too gifted a casting director, and Sherlock became such a hero that he began to take on a life of his own. Naturally, it's only a matter of time before Watson and his talentless protégé are involved in a very real case, the latter forced to live up to his public image. Caine and Kingsley dive into their roles like the regal hams that they are, the two of them finding a rhythm in the gentle slapstick that makes this high-concept play on Doyle's actual attempt to kill off his creation feels like an inspired piece of dinner theatre. Olive Films' Blu-ray may be barebones, but it's still worth picking up to have tangible evidence that this film actually exists. **DAVID EHRLICH**



Le Silence de la Mer

Directed by
JEAN-PIERRE MELVILLE

Starring
HOWARD VERNON
NICOLE STÉPHANE
JEAN-MARIE ROBAIN

1949

Released 28 APR

Blu-ray

The French director Jean-Pierre Melville exists as a figure who placed the notion of process at the forefront of his cinematic storytelling technique. Cause and effect are important on a micro rather than macro level, and his style clearly influenced modern directors such as Steven Spielberg and David Fincher. Yet where his more famous work zeroed in on action and movement, this debut feature from 1949 is atypical in that it is a verbose psychological three-hander which explores the morality of war and questions relating to whether people exist as extensions of the countries they belong to and serve. It's based on a novella by French resistance writer Jean Bruller who wrote under the pseudonym 'Vercors', and so personal was the story that Melville even decided to shoot it in Bruller's house. The film stars the unconventionally handsome Swiss actor Howard Vernon who went on to become a mainstay of '70s Euro exploitation movies. He plays Werner von Ebrennac, a cordial German army officer who, during the height of the World War Two, must board with a Frenchman and his young niece. Surprisingly, his imposition is largely benign, and he remains a paragon of politesse, playing a romantic game of warfare as if it were a sport of gentlemanly honour. Yet his guests rebel against his presence by simply refusing to talk to him, creating an air of spiralling unease which – collaborators aside – stands in as a metaphor for the German occupation of France while also offering an example of the effectiveness (and difficulty) of passive resistance. Though this was Melville's first film – and an astounding one at that – this Criterion disc also offers a short he made from 1946 called *24 Hours in the Life of a Clown* alongside the customary bounty of essays, interviews and contextualising documentaries. **DAVID JENKINS**

Rotterdam



FEATURE

Among the overwhelmingly large programme of International Film Festival Rotterdam's 44th edition, the themed strands stood out for providing a robust curatorial context for the films on show. Due to its welcome popularity, one such strand focused on the varied interpretations of feminism – the “F-word” on which everyone is happy to have an opinion.

According to programmer Bianca Taal, the strand entitled *Signals: What the F?! aimed to present films that, “each from their own individual perspective, provide a vision of the position of women.”* Surveying the programme, it proved to be as diverse as the myriad approaches to feminism today. It presented women as elderly lesbian benefactors, self-actualised killers, determined scientists and social activists, never defined in male terms. Or were they?


There was a late entry, show-stopping performance from Pussy Riot, whose energy and activist motivation became a temporary locus of the WTF?! activities. Concepts of social justice were present in two other, very different films, which allowed female solidarity to be viewed in a broader context: these were Ana Lily Armipour's Iranian vampire vigilante movie, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* and J-young Boo's *Cart*, the latter portraying the common struggle of female

hypermarket workers, fighting to be reinstated by the company that unceremoniously laid them off.

Perhaps the most thought provoking films in the WTF?! strand however, turned out to be those that directly addressed patriarchal oppression and the misrepresentation of women. In Kim Longinotto's *Dreamcatcher*, indefatigable Brenda Myers-Powell fights to end the cycle of abuse, prostitution and drug addiction that she fought her way out of, but that pulls in more and more women and girls in the Chicagoland area. Countless times, Longinotto shows Brenda encountering women who have been made to feel of no value, beyond the income selling their bodies can bring. Approaching each case with love, Brenda teaches those she encounters not to feel responsible for the social, familial and political structures that obscure their ability to show love for themselves.

By contrast, director Artemio Narro aimed to destroy the preconception of women as victims in his depiction of a bachelorette party-turned nasty, *I Stay With You*. Here, Spanish Natalia (Beatriz Arjona) arrives in Mexico City and is initiated into the type of ‘good time’ that more closely resembles a nightmare, as ‘amazon’ Valeria (Ximena Gonzalez-Rubio) and her cohorts make a sport of brutalising a barfly cowboy. Confronting the idea that portrayals of men in Mexican cinema

have frequently consisted of the aggressive alpha, Narro's vision of gender equality shows women just as capable of intimidation and violence.

Male victimhood was also explored in Mark Sawers mockumentary *No Men Beyond This Point*, which imagines a world in which men become obsolete when women evolve the ability to conceive without them. Early in the film, male politicians are shown attempting to dismiss the phenomenon, claiming a female tendency for hysteria. Such moments neatly present the absurdity of old notions of female inferiority but the film fails overall to commit to a fully radical alternative present. Instead, an all-female government is shown as a joyless propaganda machine, which, seeing no procreative requirement for sex, seek to repress urges for pleasure too. In this respect, Sawers' essentially reinforces notions of women as sexless prudes, and frames his narrative around a race to re-establish heteronormative biological and social behaviours. Despite the disappointment of a male director's apparent cautionary tale about the dangers of female dominance, such binary male-female oppositions were a welcome addition to the strand – sparking both reactionary use of the WTF?! title, and an affirmation of the importance of keeping the feminism debate alive 

Sundance



When the crowd at the Eccles Center (aka The House that Parker Posey Built) rose to its feet in rapturous applause following the premiere screening of Alfonso Gomez-Rejon's *Me & Earl & the Dying Girl*, the ovation wasn't exclusively reserved for the filmmakers behind the immaculately made teen tear-jerker. Although none of us in that sobbing Utah throng would have admitted it at the time, much of the applause was for ourselves, an acknowledgement of having the insight or blind luck to be there at the precise moment when a movie crystallised from idle buzz into a cinematic event.

The Sundance Film Festival has always been a festival predicated on the rush of discovery, and it's still a place where every attendee gets to play kingmaker for a day, despite a series of emphatically hollow breakouts (*Beasts of the Southern Wild*) which can make Park City seem like the preeminent place to gawk at the emperor's new clothes. 'Buzz' reigns supreme because, when such a high-profile festival is ruled by first-time filmmakers, there simply isn't much else to go on.

Audiences get to write the narrative, and there's a simmering atmosphere of resentment when they can't. *Mistress America*, Noah Baumbach's electric new collaboration with Greta Gerwig, is nearly on par with the Lubitsch and Hawks screwball classics that inspired it, but it

was the latest work from an established iconoclast and it arrived at the festival with a distribution deal already in place. As a result, nobody seemed to know what to do with it. The same went for *The Forbidden Room*, Guy Maddin's feverish knot of stories knitted from the ghosts of lost movies, which was practically a film festival unto itself.

Sundance, more than any other festival of its calibre, is a place where the audience is increasingly in control – it's somewhat telling that *Dying Girl* went on to become the third consecutive film to win both the Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award. Perhaps this is why Sebastián Silva's *Nasty Baby* was such a wicked delight. A winsome comedy about a gay Brooklyn couple who are trying to have a child with a friend played by Kristin Wiig, the film is practically a parody of typical Sundance fare until it takes a sharp left turn in its third act and terrorises the audience for their complacency.

Introducing *Nasty Baby* at its Egyptian Theatre premiere, Silva observed how odd it was that the movie was programmed in the NEXT section, considering that it was the fifth time that one of his features had premiered at the fest. "I should be 'Previous'" he joked from the podium, eliciting a titter of helpless laughter from the packed house. This internal identity crisis had its upside, however. The best feature

at the fest was undoubtedly Robert Eggers' *The Witch*, a Puritan horror story that's as good as *The Babadook*, but wasn't similarly ghettoised to the midnights section

That's the thing about Sundance: they can't just celebrate indie film, they also have to constantly redefine what that means. Consider the two opening night films this year. The first, a solid archival Nina Simone doc from Liz Garbus, was launching at the fest en route to a permanent home on Netflix. The second was the atrocious comedy *The Bronze*, a distaff and painfully tone-deaf Eastbound & Down riff that opens (and peaks) with a retired gymnast masturbating (*Big Bang Theory* star Melissa Rauch) to old footage of her Olympic glory. Towards the end of the festival, it was reported that the filmmakers, enthralled by the promise of a theatrical release, reportedly turned down a \$5 million offer from Netflix in favour of a much smaller deal with Relativity. *The Bronze* is a nightmare no matter where you see it, but its fallout raises a fascinating question: might creators be the unlikely saviours of the theatrical experience? Sundance may not be stacked with masterpieces every year, but it will remain a landmark in the film calendar as long as it so aggressively continues to confront us with questions that other festivals can afford to ignore.

Movers & Shakers

DIRECTED BY
William Asher

STARRING
*Charles Grodin, Walther
Matthau, Tyne Daly*

TRAILERS
*The Amish Assassin,
Kinderghoulies, Spitting
Image Goes Dutch,*

CHERRYPICK
*“Tip: never dine at an
all-you-can eat buffet at
a speedway track”*

TAGLINE

*‘A new comedy about a movie that doesn’t get made and
the people who don’t make it.’*



1985

FEATURE

When is a movie not a movie? When does a film break so completely with form and expectation as to repudiate its very existence? Other artistic disciplines have long pondered such a notion. Rene Magritte’s painting ‘The Treachery of Images’ (‘This is, like, totally not a pipe!’) reminded the art world that the map is not the territory. Music is replete with extreme examples, from Lou Reed’s futuristic feedback fudgepacket/contractually-obliged fuck you, ‘Metal Machine Music’, to John Cage’s silent composition ‘4’33” (aka ‘Money for Nothing’). Even the joy-boys got in on the act: Jerry Seinfeld hit hallowed TV paydirt with “a show about nothing”, while anyone who’s witnessed Zak Galifianakis transmute a stand-up gig into a noxious landslide of incoherent metaphysical debasement will understand how entirely comedy can eat itself.

Movers & Shakers is cast from a similarly inverted mould: less an entertainment than an intervention. A confession even – bless us, viewer, for we have sinned. It pulls us aside in the cinema foyer, hands us a big wet turd and says, “look at what you nearly stepped in.” Never has a film been so desperately apologetic for the entire moviemaking industry. A film about the making of a movie about sex and dinosaurs that will feature no sex, no dinosaurs and – ultimately – no movie, *M&S* follows screenwriter Herb Derman (Charles Grodin) and his studio-mandated attempts to come up with a story based on the title – but *not* the content – of bestselling nooky manual ‘Love in Sex’. He must also include some dinosaurs. Or not. Or whatever.

It may sound stagey and contrived, but this is the uncomfortable position in which Grodin found himself a decade earlier when asked to perform the same perverted act on real-life ‘70s slap’n’tickle bible ‘The Joy of Sex’ (think a prog-rock ‘Kama Sutra’ by way of Ladybird Books).

Paramount Pictures had shelled out beaucoup dinero for the catchy title, but the last thing they wanted was to be associated with hardcore grumble, so Grodin was handed the unenviable task of coming up with a script about anything other than sex. He did not have much joy.

The film fictionalises this half-cocked premise and its curious gestation with all the whimsy and vigour of a man seeking a series of second opinions on his Herpes diagnosis. Herb meets with skull-brained studio execs, none of whom seem keen on the project. He is then pointed toward a rollercoaster-obsessed director – “Show me the man who doesn’t get stiff on the log flume, and I’ll show you a goddamn liar!” – who soon loses interest. He visits the mansion of a former matinee idol of no fixed accent (Steve Martin) who offers only an extended monologue on the restorative powers of the guava fruit. Eventually all parties amicably arrive at the conclusion that the project should be abandoned. Magritte was right. This is not a movie. This is an anti-movie.

Movers & Shakers is a valuable self-help manual for How to Not Make Films, so valuable in fact that it currently exists only on gammy, sun-damaged VHS versions, yet to receive a much-vaunted futuristic upgrade even to DVD. It’s as dull and mirthless as any instructional guide but it does contain one seminal lesson that so many Hollywood producers routinely and brazenly ignore: if the Titanic misses the iceberg, there is no movie. More icebergs is not the solution. Changing the destination won’t help you. Neither will painting the ship blue and calling it the HMS Avatar. Grodin had at least the taste and decency to understand this and did what any good captain should – scuttle the fucker and go down with the ship. For that, sir – as for so many other things – we salute you 🍷

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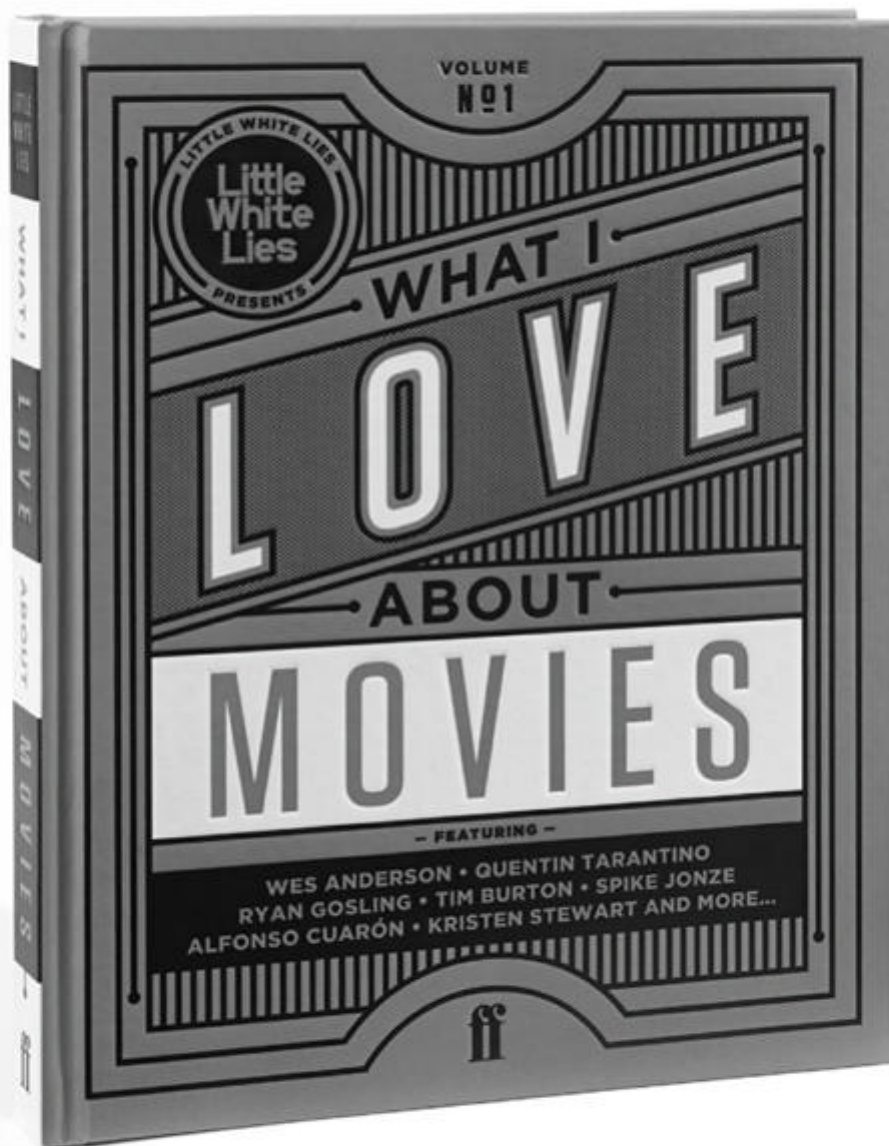


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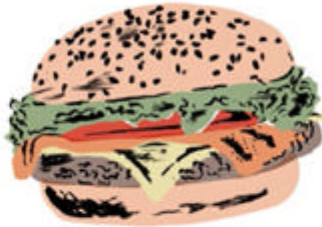
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